What follows is a set of guidelines for creating a fantasy campaign based on J.R.R. Tolkien's world of Middle-earth using the *Risus* RPG system. *Risus* is an extremely simple yet elegant "rules light" RPG which allows players and game masters drama- (or humor-) and story-heavy game play. As such, *Risus* is well-suited to represent the heroic and mythic stature of Tolkien's Middle-earth. Best of all Risus has just a wee little rule book available as a free download on the **Risus Homepage**.

I do not spell out a definitive set of *Risus* Middle-earth "rules" here nor are there specific stats for the likes of Gandalf, the Nazgûl or even a Balrog. There are, however, enough *suggestions* to allow one to construct a *Risus* Middle-earth campaign that does some justice to Tolkien's original creation.

"Funky Dice"

I suggest using the "Funky Dice" option when running a Middle-earth based campaign. As in most fantasy campaigns, there will be creatures whose powers and strength far outstrip those of most adventurers or even heroes. Player characters can be built with the standard 60 points using d6's. In that way the d8-d20 dice can adequately represent more powerful creatures (i.e. Nazgûl, dragons, Balrogs, etc.). Game masters may allow players to advance beyond the standard d6 if they wish. However, note that even heroes such as Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas have skills which can sufficiently be represented by the standard d6 target chart.

Racial Clichés

I don't generally like the use of racial clichés in a *Risus* campaign. Clichés seem to represent more of what a character *does* than *is*. Not every Elf (3)

will be the same. A handmaiden of Galadriel, for instance would have far different skills than a typical elven warrior in Lorien. Though there would certainly be many similarities between the two due to their race (immortality, keen senses, etc.), the warrior would likely be far better with blade and bow that the handmaiden (though her accomplishments with a comb and mirror could be legendary!). It would be more appropriate to use Elf Warrior (3) and Elf Handmaiden (3) to represent each character respectively. In that way inherent racial traits are preserved while specific skills (clichés) are indicated.

The same rule would apply for dwarves and hobbits alike. A Dwarven Miner (3) is actually quite different than a Dwarven Bard (3). While both are long-lived, one may be far better with an axe than a song. Similarly there is the Hobbit Merchant (3), the Hobbit Scout (3), the ever-present Hobbit Gardner (4)… you get the idea.

Cultural Clichés

Cultural clichés can be handled in much the same way as racial clichés. A Rohirrim Warrior (4) would be different than a Rohirrim Healer (3). It is up to a game master to decide what cultural traits would be consistent between the two – certainly language, perhaps an affinity to horses, and some shared spirituality and history. In the same way there is no generic Gondorian (3) and likely no generic Beorning (3) either.

There are some interesting instances where a cultural descriptor paired with a profession cliché produces a unique cliché all its own. Take for instance the Dunedain Ranger (4). One could make the case that there is no Ranger cliché (at least as most gamers have come to know it from their *Dungeons & Dragons* days) since that cliché was originally derived from the Dunedain wanderers. In Middle-earth the Dunedain rangers are unique and legendary and differ from trackers, scouts or hunters of other races and cultures.

Monsters

Here's where the real fun begins. The simple rule of thumb is to decide whether a monster alone is universal enough to represent a cliché, if they are to be used like racial descriptors, or if a combination of monster cliché and professional cliché are to be used.

For instance, since they have many unique powers and abilities attributed to their form, a dragon in Middle-earth can be an appropriate monster cliché. In a post on the [Risus mailing list](#), *Risus* creator S. John Ross suggested representing Smaug (the dragon from the *Hobbit*) as a Dragon (5d12). This would certainly makes sense since the Dragon cliché adequately encompasses a number of spectacular abilities such as knowledge, strength and extra senses as expressed on the "funky dice" target chart.

Orcs too work as simple monster clichés. While there is not much written about orcish culture, an innovative game master could dream up an Orc Shaman (3) or an Orc Assassin (3). A simpler way of treating these creatures, however is to "universalize" their racial traits and differentiate along breeding lines. All orcs can be considered apt fighters with equivalent abilities. The typical Orc (1) or Orc (2) would be most appropriate to represent the common goblin, while an Orc (3) or Orc (4) would be the garden variety Uruk, or common orc. Thus we can reserve the Orc (5) and Orc (6) as Uruk-Hai and simply roll their extra ability to travel in daylight into their monster (racial) cliché.

If you *must* bring unique and mythical creatures such as dragons, Ringwraiths and Balrogs into your Middle-earth campaign, the liberal use of "funky dice" is encouraged. First establish a "template" creature against which to rate all others (i.e. the 5d12 dragon from above). As with orcs and simpler creatures, monster clichés should adequately represent the powers and abilities of these unique creatures (again the 5d12 dragon). Feel free to embellish these beings with a variety of other clichés (such as a Nazgûl's sorcery and spying ability for example).

Magic

Magic in Middle-earth is much more of a "literary" device than a scientific or rules-based system. This is perhaps a good thing as it encourages game masters and players to view magic within the context of the storyline, character roles and personal motivations. Rather than embark on an exhaustive exploration on the nature of magic in Middle-earth, I will again merely suggest some basic guidelines. These should be adequate to represent any occurrence of magic that might arise in a Middle-earth

campaign. Anyone wishing for a more thorough treatment of the subject should read Berislav Lopac's excellent article on creating a [Middle-earth magic system for the GURPS RPG](#).

Enchantment

The simplest way to handle magic is to determine the intention of the magic "user". When used appropriately, magic is considered blessed or "sanctioned". When used inappropriately, magic is considered fell, corrupt and "unsanctioned".

Sanctioned magic is used regularly by elves in the crafting of their works. Elven liquors are refreshing and renewing, elven blades are baneful to dark creatures, and elven cloaks seem to blend in with natural surroundings. However, elves consider neither themselves nor their works magical. They simply are who they are. It is the inherent "blessed" nature of the elves and the simple intention of their craft which makes their works endure.

Elves are certainly capable of using magic in "unsanctioned" ways as well. Though Feanor's crafting of the Silmarils was well intentioned in the beginning, under the corruption of Melkor, the enchantment of the Silmarils worked a deep greed and mistrust within him. Similar too are the works of dwarves who are themselves "blessed" creatures of a sort. Left to their own devices, dwarves fashion beautiful treasures, strongholds and weapons that long endure. But under the seduction of the seven Rings of Power, they too were corrupted by greed and lust for gold.

In terms of game effects, any elven crafting cliché may be considered to have simple "magical" effects as agreed between the player and game master (refer to the elven rope, liquor and cloaks above as examples). Elves never casually craft *anything,* so this would only apply to items wrought without haste. Attempts to create *intentionally* enchanted or powerful items (think of the Silmarils, the three elven rings, or Isildur's sword Narsil) are treated differently. In most cases the crafter in question should begin with mastery (six dice) in their appropriate crafting cliché. The creation of such an item could result in the permanent sacrifice of one or more dice in the crafting cliché depending on the power of the item in question (note that these dice may be re-earned later as normal). If this penalty seems too harsh or unrealistic, an alternative would be to count each exceptional item against the total a character could ever create. This is based on the idea that even a master craftsman would only make a certain number of truly spectacular artifacts in his or her lifetime.

Dwarves and even orcs may also consider many of their craft works similarly "magical". Whereas elven enchantments lie along the more natural crafts (clothing, woodwork, food, etc.) those or dwarves and orcs are almost always martial in nature (weapons and armor). The effect of an elven blade may be more baneful to evil creatures than a dwarven blade due to the "purer" nature of the elven spirit. However, dwarven works of metal and stone (including gemstones) are renowned for their strength and have their own ability to inspire and endure.

As orcs are corrupted elves in their origin, their enchantments are as negative images of elven works. For instance, orcs may be able to make cloaks which serve the wearer best when in barren or bleak surroundings. So too do the orcs make a liquor similar to the elves which restores strength and vitality to the body. It's effect, however, is much sharper and firey and has none of the wholesome and restful quality of the elven cordial.

Wizardry

Another manifestation of magic in Middle-earth may be referred to as wizardry or sorcery and is rarer and more elusive than the inherent enchanted nature of elves, dwarves and orcs.

Closer to the original source of creation are the gods of Middle-earth also known as the Valar and their kin and servants, the Maiar. The power of these beings is great, but with each passing age, they have withdrawn further and further from the affairs of the world. The most notable of the Maia remaining in Middle-earth are the dark lord Sauron, the wizards Gandalf, Saruman, and Radagast and the demons of shadow and flame known as Balrogs. The number of Maia in Middle-earth is intentionally small as the potential power each can wield could easily disrupt and destroy much which the Valar first built. Such is the case of Sauron, greatest of the Maiar on Middle-earth who was driven back again and again over the ages and who ever seeks to increase his power and influence over the world. The Balrogs too were driven beneath the earth and almost all destroyed save one or two.

The Maiar known as Gandalf, Saruman and Radagast are known by many as wizards for they appear as men with strange powers. In truth, they are Maiar sent by the Valar to Middle-earth with careful instructions to use their power appropriately and sparingly. Again we have here the appropriate and inappropriate use of power (magic). Gandalf remains one of the few Maiar who continues to use his power wisely and well. Saruman falls to the

seduction of power embodied in the One Ring and Sauron, while Radagast retreats to the isolation of nature forgetting his divine charge.

While no character can begin as a being such as a Maia, it is *possible* though difficult to learn magic. Even the elves were able to teach their skills of craft to the men who came to rule Númenor, a kingdom later noted for its works of wonder and enchantment. Sauron tempted nine kings of men to his service by teaching them sorcery (further enhanced by their possession of nine Rings of Power). The chief among them became the dreaded witch-king of Angmar and the remaining eight Nazgûl possessed powers of their own. And it is even conceivable that Saruman taught some of his art to orcs and other servants during the War of the Ring.

The teaching of magic is problematic however. There are few who possess the skill willing to pass it along, and for good reason. The men of Númenor came in time to abuse their power and so fell into darkness and destruction themselves. Thus the elves are unwilling to teach men their art. Gandalf showed no willingness nor inclination to pass on his talents seeing the value in keeping such power in the world to a minimum. There is no indication that Balrogs or Nazgûl are able to teach their powers (though the latter might), and Sauron is either busy building up his own power during the Third Age or has been utterly destroyed by the end of it.

In short, if a game master is generous enough to allow players access to magical talents, he should be very diligent in keeping track of how characters are using such power. Liberal use of magic is *always* risky tempting the wielder with the desire for more power and control. In some cases this kind of use may bring characters under the influence and domination of other unwholesome powers in the world. Used sparingly and subtly, however, magic may be used wisely and well keeping within the balance of the world.

Magic Items

Another way to bring magic into a *Risus* Middle-earth campaign is through the use of enchanted items. These will most likely range from weapons and armor to clothing and jewelry – anything that falls under the normal gear needed to use clichés at full effectiveness. In some cases these items will add interesting story elements to the game such as the sword that glows when orcs are near or the boots that make the burden of a long journey light. In other cases these items can act as bonus die gear adding extra dice or pips to appropriate clichés. Since the adding of a whole extra die is a

powerful enhancement in *Risus*, game masters can handle magic items in a variety of ways. A sword can have a baneful effect against orcs and goblins causing them to think twice before attacking anyone who wields it, but add no actual bonuses to physical combat rolls. Similarly an enchanted sword, shield and breast plate may add an extra die only when all of them are worn together, the reasoning being that the critical mass of all enchantments is needed in order to change a combatant's effectiveness in combat.

Extremely powerful enchantments should simply not be used at all. No Rings of Power, Silmarils or palantír. If for any reason you find it necessary to include these items in an adventure, they should have a very disruptive effect on a character's personality, motivations, and power. While this could add an interesting twist to a campaign, be careful to not cheapen the presence or effects of such powerful magic. Even Galadriel's power within Lothlorien was greatly enhanced by the elven Ring of Power, Nenya, and earned her a reputation as a terrible sorceress among dwarves and men alike (though general prejudice against elves helped feed such an image).

Hopefully this article has provided enough material and guidance with which to construct a good story-driven Middle-earth campaign using the *Risus* rules. Please feel free to send <u>me</u> any questions or comments. With any luck this article may spawn discussion on the <u>Risus Mailing List</u> or a few Middle-earth RPG sites.

A good place find material for a Middle-earth campaign is the <u>Encyclopedia of Arda</u> website, an astonishing reference to nearly every person place and thing appearing in Tolkien's Middle-earth books. If you are interested in a more structured set of rules you may want to try <u>Decipher's Lord of the Rings</u> RPG which is one of the few games able to capture the mood and feel of living and adventuring in Middle-earth.