

Design Philosophy:

I began work on Heart of Darkness when I was in high school in the late 90s. It started out as an attempt to translate the SPECIAL system used in such computer RPGs as Fallout for use in a homebrew setting based on Stephen King's Dark Tower novels. I kept adding to it and changing it over time to such a degree that these initial inspirations are just that, inspirations, and the only similarities Heart of Darkness retains is their tone.

At its core this game is designed to recreate several older genres of stories. Pulp Sword and Sorcery adventures; as exemplified by heroes such as Conan, Arthurian Romance, Gothic Horror, and to a lesser extent classic Greek epics. With a little fiddling it can also be used to run a western or high fantasy game, and other similar genres such as steam punk or post apocalyptic should be possible with minor alterations to the system and mechanics.

In designing the game I did not set out to reinvent the wheel. The game is fairly traditional, and it was not my intention to create anything radically divergent, merely a refinement of what has come before that better fit with the mood I was trying to capture. I have not changed fundamental aspects of table top role-playing games or commonly used RPG jargon without a good reason.

Likewise I did not set out to create a *completely* original setting. As I said the game is set against a backdrop of classical mythology, Arthurian romance, and gothic horror. I used plenty of characters and setting elements within the game, and I chose not to change the names. I also stayed true to the original context to the extent which the new setting would allow, and only made changes where they are necessary to the tone of the piece.

The mechanics of Heart of Darkness are not complex. All actions are resolved using a simple dice + modifier test, and only one sort of dice is ever used. One can learn to play the game quickly, and the majority of the book is composed of options to make the game deeper and more complex, but do not overburden the basic game system. You will rarely have to look up a rule or consult a table during the course of the game.

The main goal of the system is freedom and customization. Characters in Heart of Darkness are people first, not merely collections of powers and abilities. Any character can attempt to do

anything a real person could do, albeit with varying degrees of success. Likewise you are free to act however you want, the game has no built in system for personality or morality. I have found that while many games claim that such systems encourage good role-playing, I find that they usually only serve to force characters into stereotypes or put them in situations where they have to choose between the behavior they want their character to perform and what the rules declare to be the right choice.

As long as all the players in the table can stand to play with one another there is no limit to a character's personality, goals, or ethics. There are only choices and the natural consequences that follow.

Heart of Darkness is not a game of light-hearted adventure, and the consequences of a character's actions can be deadly serious. Although there are definite levels of power, virtually any character has a chance to beat any other, especially if they have proper tactics and preparation on their side. Any character can die at any time, combat is fast and with lasting consequences.

Likewise character's resources take time to recover. One cannot simply take a nap and heal serious wounds; they will have to carry the consequences of their actions with them. Thus even a trivial battle or expenditure of resources could come back to haunt a careless character down the road.

There are a wide variety of potential character types in Heart of Darkness. Aside from the old RPG trinity of warrior, thief, and priest, there is also a need for scholars and sages, craftsmen and tinkers, and all manner of diplomats. Players are free to customize their characters however they like, and won't always neatly fit into one role, and characters do not have to conform to stereotypes. A cunning or charismatic swordsman can be every bit as effective in battle as a muscle bound hulk or knight in shining armor.

Heart of Darkness is a fairly combat heavy game, but it is not simply about killing people and taking their stuff for fun. It is, however, fully possible to play the game without any sort of combat if that is your thing, there are full rules for non combat skills and plenty to do that involves on social encounters, one can even play a perfectly ordinary person with no inclination towards war or any other grand endeavor if that is the group's preferred style of play.

Actions scenes are fast and tactical and should not be undertaken lightly. The combat system is relatively simple and abstracted, but it does contain numerous options. The Game Master can use the environment and situation to drastically change up combat, and the maneuver system allows a tremendous array of tactical options for any given fighter without being overly complex or burdensome. Note that all of the maneuvers are available to all characters, although some people are better at them than others. There are no limitations on how many maneuvers a character can know or use in a given encounter, or exclusions on who gets what.

Magic in Heart of Darkness is dangerous and mysterious. It is assumed that the players will not be magicians; magic is the domain of evil cultists, wise and reclusive sages, chaotic and unpredictable fair folk, and the gods themselves. This is, of course, not to say that magic is unfair.

Magic has limits, and it is certainly possible for a mortal warrior to defeat a wizard, but it should not be a casual undertaking. Cold iron, holy water, and a strong will can negate most of a sorcerer's powers, and a prepared warrior will be able to kill or drive off an equally skilled wizard at least half the time, and can overcome even greater foes with the backing of their allies. Even the gods are not above the rules, and can be outwitted or even defeated by the strongest and most cunning of mortal men.

The game does include full rules for supernatural characters, both those blessed with supernatural artifacts and abilities as well as fully fledged wizards. Though it is not the game's default assumption, remember that freedom of choice is the name of the game. Magic is precious and hard to come by, and player wizards will need to ration out their strength over the course of a mission. If they unleash their full powers they can quickly resolve almost any situation, but will then be nearly powerless and rely on their allies to pick up the slack. A wizard who shows restraint in their magic can last almost indefinitely, and will be unlikely to have more of an impact on the game than their mundane friends unless they choose the precise right moment to unleash their power.

In closing, it has been a long journey getting this game ready, and the work isn't over yet, but I felt it was time to share. I offer my most sincere thanks to those who take their time to read and play Heart of Darkness, and I hope you have as much fun doing so as I had writing it!

-Allan Norton