The Shadows of the Trees
A Tale from the Far Horizons of the Unknown
(Public Playtest Document)

Author's Note

Hey everyone! I figured I'd take a second to explain what the heck this is, since it's probably not entirely obvious. This is the latest iteration of my *Far Horizons of the Unknown* system, which is what I'm calling the underlying ruleset that this game uses. (The first such iteration was my Game Chef 2012 entry, *Coyotes in Dark Alleyways*. This new one is much better than that one was.)

Far Horizons of the Unknown is a system meant to produce stories about competent heroes facing a mysterious and overwhelming world. Like *Fiasco* or *Geiger Counter*, the setting can vary wildly, but the basic structure of the story will stay the same. If all goes well, eventually it will be published with a bunch of different adventures, rules support for creating your own adventures, rules support for ongoing play, and a variety of other cool things.

In the meantime, I give you *The Shadows of the Trees*, which is a complete and fully playable one-shot game, set in a sword-and-sorcery world. This is a playtest version, which means that I am actively looking for people willing to play it and tell me what they think. If you decide it's interesting enough to play, or even just to read, please let me know! Send me your thoughts at semielgames@gmail.com. (Even better, if you want to give me some free advertising, post your thoughts in public somewhere and send me the link!)

Thanks, and enjoy the game.

Introduction

To play, you will need:

-3 to 5 players, including yourself.
-About three hours, give or take.
-15 of something to use as tokens. Poker chips, coins, and funny-shaped dice all work well.
-6 or so normal, 6-sided dice.
-A copy of the Hero Sheet, and each of the four Adventure Sheets, provided at the end of this document.

In this game, you and your friends will work together to tell the story of a "sword and sorcery" fantasy hero, like Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian or Fritz Leiber's Gray Mouser. One of you will be in charge of portraying the hero-- deciding what they say and do, and how they react to the dangerous and mysterious world they encounter. The rest of you get to portray that dangerous and mysterious world.

To help, I've given you some starting material, and some simple rules for figuring out what to say throughout the story. That's what the rest of this document is about.

The Hero

As I said, one of you will play the hero.

Your hero must be brave, interesting, and adventurous. You should give your hero a good heroic name (a name list is provided in the section called "Setting"), and, if you want, just a little bit of back-story. You don't have to come up with too much, though; you'll find out more during play.

Your hero can be of any gender, but in the text I'll stick to feminine pronouns, for simplicity's sake.

The next thing you need to do is choose your three *Key Traits*. Key Traits are central descriptions of your character, which influence everything she does.

Key Traits also reward you, by giving you tokens when you bring them into the story. These tokens will help you during times of danger. But more on that later.

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You get one Key Trait automatically:

- Your hero is *an adventurer*, who laughs in the face of danger. Take a token the first time you press directly into a situation from which a lesser person would flee.

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Next, take one of the following:

- Your hero is *a great fencer*. Take a token the first time you solve a problem through the judicious and skillful application of your blade.

- Your hero is *an unstoppable force*. Take a token the first time you charge into the enemy (real or imagined) with reckless abandon, making them fear your great strength.

- Your hero is *a master of subtlety*. Take a token the first time you avoid a problem by stealth, trickery, or subterfuge.

- Your hero is *serpent-tongued*. Take a token the first time you worm your way out of or into something, with flattery and quick-talking.

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And lastly, take one of these:

- Your hero is *a champion of justice*. Take a token the first time you put yourself in danger to help the innocent.

- Your hero is *a treasure-hunter.* Take a token the first time you put yourself in danger for the promise of loot.

- Your hero is *a seeker of truth*. Take a token the first time you put yourself in danger to learn about something new and mysterious.

- Your hero is *proud and honorable*. Take a token the first time you put yourself in danger to prove that you have the strength to do so.

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Once you have chosen your Key Traits, write them down on the Hero Sheet at the end of this document. Then, when you're ready to begin the game, choose one of the plot hooks on that sheet and follow its instructions.

The Adventure

The rest of you are called the "*world players*". You are responsible, collectively, for everything else that happens in the story. You can usually just say whatever you think should happen, but to help you out you will all get *Adventure Sheets*. There are four of these Adventure Sheets, which get divided based on the number of players:

-Two world players each get two sheets.
-Three world players each get one sheet, and share the fourth between them.
-Four world players each get one sheet.

Your sheets are secret! You'll be sharing their contents through play, but it's more fun if the other players don't know what's coming.

The first thing on your sheet will be a **Motif**. Much like in your high school English class, this motif is some sort of image or theme that you will bring back throughout the story. In this game, though, all of the motifs are also elements of the world that are mysterious, wonderous or dangerous.

These motifs come with a bunch of **Key Moments**. These are brief situations where the hero is confronted with your motif in some way. You'll use them to add some mystery, wonder, or danger to the hero's life. They can happen in any order, though it's usually best to start subtle and work your way up to the big confrontations.

You'll want to try to find ways to introduce at least some of your Key Moments, because they come with a special rule:

When you introduce a Key Moment, you get a token.

You don't have to get anyone's permission, just take a token when you feel you've earned it. However, this comes with two caveats: First, you can only earn one token from each Key Moment. Second, there is a limit on the number of tokens you can earn in a game, based on the number of players. Here's how that works:

-Two world players can earn six tokens each.
-Three world players can earn four tokens each.
-Four world players can earn three tokens each.

You'll use these tokens when you want to mess with the hero a little more, by calling for a *Danger Roll*. More on that in the next section.

The last two things on your sheet will be a **Location** and a **Character** (Or possibly a group of **Characters**). These are precisely what they sound like: interesting places where the action can happen, and interesting people that the hero can interact with. I give you a name and enough description to get you started, but it falls to you to bring them to life. If you think a character should also have a dark past and a false leg, even though that's not on the sheet, that's totally up to you.

Unless they're part of one of the hero's plot hooks, you're never required to make use of a particular location, character, or Key Moment. Use them when they seem useful, and don't worry about it if they fall by the wayside. (You'll want to hit enough Key Moments to get your tokens, of course!)

An important part of being a world player is to *always have a theory*. The events will be weird and hard to explain, and your fellow world players will make them even weirder. You should always be considering what could possibly be going on, and trying to make your contributions to the game line up with your own personal theories. But don't get too attached! The other players will throw in plenty of wrenches, and you should be willing to change your theories to fit new information.

Danger Rolls

I said that you can usually just say what you think should happen. Here's why that's just "usually". There's an important exception:

The World Players cannot cause the hero or the hero's immediate plans to come to harm, unless they spend a token and call for a Danger Roll.

If you want the hero to get hurt by a tiger, or get trapped in a well, or fail to protect his friend, spend a token and call for a roll.

Once you've spent your token, a Danger Roll has four steps:

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1. Ask the hero player what the hero's current **goal** is. Are they trying to reach the top of the mountain? Protect the baby from being eaten by the dragon? Steal the treasure?

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2. Define a **danger**. This is something that could go wrong for the hero in the current situation. Maybe the hero might be injured, or lose a valuable artifact, or wake up the sleeping guard. This cannot be directly opposed to the goal, it has to be something *else* that could go wrong.

So if the hero is primarily trying to protect the baby from harm, your danger cannot be that the baby gets hurt. Instead, maybe the hero and the baby are separated, or the hero loses his backpack, or he has to sacrifice the life of another innocent.

Also, at this point, you or anyone else can spend another token to add yet another danger to the roll, the same way you just did. If more than one token is spent on a roll, you'll probably want to write them down to make sure you keep them all straight.

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3. Ask the hero player if they would like to spend a token to introduce a **bonus**. This is something extra the hero might get out of the deal. Again, it can't be directly opposed to the goal or any of the dangers, it has to be a separate thing that might go well for the hero. Maybe the hero impresses the people watching, or finds a bit of treasure, or gets rid of an annoying hanger-on.

And again, if there is more than one token spent on a roll, write it down!

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4. Have the hero player roll a number of dice equal to *three plus the number of tokens spent.*

So, on a simple roll with one danger and no bonuses, you'll roll four dice. Any extra dangers or bonuses add another die.

Any die that comes up as a 4 or higher is a *hit*, while a 3 or lower is a *miss.* Next, assign the dice as follows:

-Assign one die to the **Goal**. On a hit, the hero achieves their goal. On a miss, they fail.

-Assign one die to each **Danger.** On a hit, the hero avoids the danger. On a miss, the danger comes to pass.

-If there is a **Bonus** defined, assign it one die. On a hit, the hero gets the bonus. On a miss, they don't. (If there is no Bonus defined, just skip this one.)

-Finally, assign one die to ***learning something about the mystery***. On a hit, the hero finds out something meaningful about what's going on. This needs to be a solid clue or connection, not just even more weirdness. On a miss, there's just even more weirdness.

It may take a bit of negotiation to come up with goals, dangers, and bonuses that everyone is comfortable with. Your goals should not fix everything immediately, and your dangers shouldn't be the end of the world. You're not trying to find the most extreme thing that could possibly happen, but just something interesting that would drive the story forward. In general, rolls near the beginning of the game should have smaller stakes, which get more and more serious as the story reaches its climax.

Since tokens are a limited resource, there are only so many rolls that can happen. Once you are out of tokens, the hero is out of danger (whether through glorious victory or terrified flight), and the story is essentially over. If you like, take a few minutes to wrap things up and show the aftermath, and then you're done.

Setting

This adventure takes place in a sword-and-sorcery fantasy world. Magicians, monsters, and gods are all very real, and very powerful. There's no more than a medieval level of technology, and the world is large and mysterious, especially as you get further from the few centers of civilization.

Our hero is currently in the Great Forest, a massive and lightly inhabited forest of towering trees, dense underbrush, and exotic animals. What she is doing there, and what she might find among the trees, is up to you.

Here's a list of names, to help you portray the people of the Great Forest:

1. Aasin	6. Nessa	11. Agamete	16. Myneste
2. Xanes	7. Antes	12. Suhala	17. Ninelus
3. Ariomel	8. Sumnah	13. Halia	18. Azha
4. Haistor	9. Bilah	14. Thallit	19. Jan
5. Heratyl	10. Samam	15. Sibylla	20. Muma

Warning! Past this point are the Hero Sheet and the four Adventure Sheets. The Hero Sheet may be safely perused, but the Adventure Sheets are best left unknown. Once you've reached this point, just pass out the sheets, have the hero player choose a plot hook, and start playing!

Hero Sheet

Key Traits

Your hero is _an adventurer_.

Your hero is _____.

Your hero is _____.

Plot Hooks

-Are you trying to get information or an appraisal on a rare and valuable artifact? Tell the player with Adventure Sheet #1 so, and ask them to introduce their location and character for the first scene.

-Are you hoping to investigate some ancient ruins in the area? Tell the player with Adventure Sheet #2 so, and ask them to introduce their location and character for the first scene.

-Are you helping a local whose daughter's gone missing? Tell the player with Adventure Sheet #3 so, and ask them to introduce their location and character for the first scene.

-Are you spying for the court of King Akmihr? Tell the player with Adventure Sheet #4 so, and ask them to introduce their location and character for the first scene.

Adventure Sheet #1

Motif: Mysterious religious practices. Sacrifices, secret meetings, the whole deal. It's up to you and the other players to figure out stuff like who the worshippers are and what their goals are, but I bet it's not pleasant.

Key Moments:

- In the marketplace, the cost of small food animals is unreasonably high. If the hero asks why a chicken costs that much gold, she'll be told that demand for them has skyrocketed over the past few weeks.

- The hero overhears two people talking in a strange and ancient-sounding language, unlike any she's ever heard in her wide travels.

- On a large fallen tree trunk lays the corpse of a monkey, with its organs removed and each of its limbs pinned to the wood by a small, ornate dagger.

- A circle, surrounding by cultic statues and symbols. Everything within its borders appears to have died, including the plants.

- A ritual at midnight. Twenty hooded worshippers with their human sacrifice.

Location: Rokkan, the market-town. While not large by the standards of the plains cities, Rokkan is one of the main centers of trade in the great forest. People travel long distances to buy and sell from the merchants there. The main market is built in a large clearing, but because demand for space is high, a second level has grown up. This consists of an eclectic collection of platforms on stilts, connected by rope bridges.

Character: Ido, the friendly merchant. A balding, slightly overweight man, Ido is a successful businessman. He's friendly to all his customers, but he's especially fond of anyone with an interesting story, an exotic bauble to sell, or just a willingness to indulge his love of talking to whoever will listen.

Adventure Sheet #2

Motif: A voice without a speaker. From time to time, a thin, wheedling voice from nowhere will comment on the hero's actions, offer advice, issue commands, or whatever is appropriate to the situation. Is it an invisible person? A god? A magician scrying? Some sort of madness? Whoever it is, he's an arrogant son of a bitch

Key Moments:

- The voice inserts a passing remark into a conversation. It answers a rhetorical question, dismisses a boast, makes a wry comment, or otherwise tries to throw the hero off her game a little.

- The voice warns of an impending danger which the hero has not yet recognized, with the appropriate tinge of mockery.

- The voice offers a piece of information that no one should be able to know.

- In a situation where another person really ought not be (the hero's bedside, the middle of a terrifying danger, etc.), the voice makes a specific request, command, or entreaty.

- The voice screams in terror.

Location: The Temple Ruins. No one remembers what its name was, or what god it was dedicated to, but everyone knows that it's a good idea to avoid it. It's in the shape of a step pyramid, with huge brass doors inset on one side. One of the doors is off its hinges.

Character: Darir, the hermit. Old and mostly blind, she has a reputation as an herbalist and miracle worker. Despite the epithet "hermit", these qualities provide her with a brisk trade in healings and advice. She's likely to look poorly on anyone who isn't planning on leaving her richer than when they came.

Adventure Sheet #3

Motif: Giant birds. Similar in appearance to ordinary birds of prey, but giant. They are rarely seen and not usually overtly aggressive, but *I* wouldn't want to mess with them. The people who live in the area tell all sorts of stories about them: they're said to be anything from a blessed race that predates humanity, to witches taking animal form, to the eyes of the gods, to an abomination created by a mad magician.

Key Moments:

- A stray wind briefly disturbs the undergrowth, revealing an implausibly large feather.

- A large form, moving far too quickly to be a cloud, briefly blocks out the sun.

- A giant bird flies down and blocks the hero's path. If she tries to move past it, it spreads its wings threateningly.

- A giant bird, out of nowhere, swoops down and carries away an animal or inanimate object.

- A giant bird, out of nowhere, attacks the hero.

Location: Deadman's Pond. A large, approximately circular gap in the trees, which is nothing like a normal clearing. Nothing seems to grow here, beyond a few weeds. The ground is stony, and slopes down in a bowl-shaped depression, at the bottom of which is a small pool of cloudy water.

Characters: The "tree bandits". Not the name they give themselves, of course. They live in houses built high in the trees, and seem to spend more time up there than down on the ground. It's said that many of them are former soldiers who deserted, criminals who were exiled or are fleeing justice, followers of illegal religions, and others who had good reason to get far away from civilization (hence the name). No one's quite sure what they get up to, up there, but they don't seem to bother anyone, and their trade is as good as anyone's.

Adventure Sheet #4

Motif: Eyes. Eyes of a pale blue, nearly gray, which always seem to be watching the hero.

Key Moments:

- The hero has a strong feeling of being watched. If she turns around, all she sees is a bird taking off from a nearby tree branch.

- A passing animal glances up at the hero, revealing weirdly human-looking pale blue eyes.

- The hero sees a statue or carving with disturbingly realistic eyes of pale blue. Whenever she's not directly looking at it, she could swear that the eyes were moving.

- Dozens of pale blue eyes in the dark, surrounding the hero.

- As the hero talks to someone, she notices their eyes slowly fading from a healthy brown to a pale blue, nearly gray.

Location: Hakhtas' Folly. An area of the forest with strange, magical properties. Everything from the trees to the rocks to the insects in the area is slightly odd. The most overtly magical element is perhaps the stream that runs uphill, culminating in a backwards waterfall that feeds into a small lake on the top of a ridge.

Character: Azeed, the court magician. He's dressed in an absurd robe, and attended by a retinue of servants. He's in the great forest on some sort of research mission, and doesn't see much point having anything to do with the people who live in the area. His servants take care of buying whatever he needs, both mundane supplies and a variety of weird things with no obvious pattern. He's likely to respond extremely poorly to anyone who he thinks is getting in the way of his mission.

Ludography

The influences on this game are many and varied. Some are obvious, and others less so. These are some of the most immediate:

Dirty Secrets by Seth Ben-Ezra.
Apocalypse World, *In A Wicked Age*, and *Otherkind* by Vincent Baker.
Psi*Run by Meguey Baker.
Polaris and *The Drifter's Escape* by Ben Lehman.
Fiasco by Jason Morningstar.
Annalise by Nathan D. Paoletta.
Sorcerer & Sword by Ron Edwards.
Lady Blackbird and *Ghost/Echo* by John Harper
The Shadow of Yesterday by Clinton R. Nixon

Thank you for reading, and please send me your thoughts!

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