# 1

A Primer

Introduction

Shadow, Sword & Spell is a humanistic, pulp fantasy game drawing its inspiration from the stories of pulp fantasy writers who wrote between 1930 and 1960 – Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, Gardner Fox, Jack Vance, Fletcher Pratt, L. Sprague de Camp, and their contemporaries. Shadow, Sword & Spell provides you the tools you need to create your own vision of the sword-and-sorcery genre.

What Is Humanistic, Pulp Fantasy?
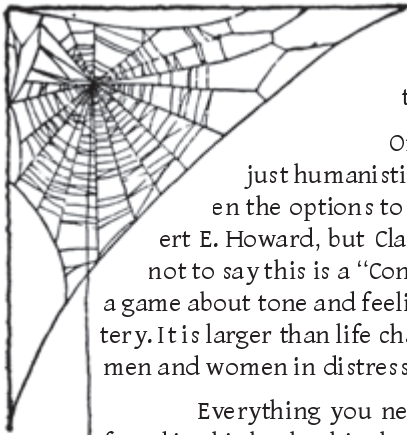
Humanistic fantasy is fantasy in which humans take the center stage. It is fantasy largely without the races familiar to fantasy today – elves, dwarves and the like.

Of course, Shadow, Sword & Spell is more than just humanistic fantasy; it is also pulp fantasy. You are given the options to play pulp fantasy inspired by not only Robert E. Howard, but Clark Ashton Smith and H.P. Lovecraft. This is not to say this is a "Conan Game," or a "Dreamlands Game." This is a game about tone and feeling. Horror and discovery. Secrets and mystery. It is larger than life characters, vile villains, vast vistas, and nubile men and women in distress. Shadow, Sword & Spell is your game.

Everything you need to know as a player or Game Master is found in this book. This chapter -- the Primer -- tells you what to expect from the game, explaining its core mechanic and how it's used in the game.

After all the rules and options, little room is spent telling you what a game should not only feel like, but what you should do with it. As a player, you should know after reading this chapter what to expect from the world of Shadow, Sword & Spell. As a Game Master, you will know what to do with the game, and know about the type of games you are able to run. This Primer is your amuse-bouche, if you will. This one bite sets the table for what is to come. So without further

ado, here is Shadow, Sword & Spell.

Setting

Shadow, Sword & Spell takes place in a world laden with mysteries, magic and plots. This is a world into which the characters are born and in which they must survive if they are to make a name for themselves. This setting is filled with a smörgåsbord of cultures waxing and waning in power. Various kingdoms, city-states and regions exist offering numerous challenges. Drawing inspiration from the writers influencing these games. The world of Shadow, Sword & Spell offers numerous locations teaming with possibilities. This is a world awash in conflict, tinged with magic and filled with danger.

The stronger you are, the more power you have, and this is evident in the world. Merchants work and scheme to gain more wealth. Nobles work and scheme for more power. Priests scheme for influence. Everyone has an agenda, and often these agendas conflict. It is this conflict which often drags the characters into it, either willingly or unwillingly.

The world contains sun-blasted deserts, vine-shrouded jungles, ancient ruins with hidden secrets and more that offers endless possibilities. It is this world that the GMs set their adventures in, and the players explore.

For The Players

Your character is a native of the world. They might be a thief, who due to their knack of picking pockets, makes a living in Gravina robbing all, while dodging the competing guilds. They might be a raider who sells their sword to the highest bidder and fights for any or all as long as the silver flows. They might even hail from the region of Cal'athar and have an affinity for the forces of arcane allowing them to work spells outside the realm of humankind.

In Shadow, Sword & Spell: Basic, you create a character at the start of their adventuring career. Some event, or desire, drives you to thumb your nose at your lot in life, and you choose to live the way you want too. Society holds no bonds for you, and you choose the life you want to live. Why should the wealthy alone be wealthy? Why should the baron own his own land? You want that, and more, and by Azathoth's Radiance you will have it!

In **Basic** you character adventures and grows. Slowly they become stronger, and influential. Over time they begin to acquire not only the trappings of wealth, but power. Their influence and fame leads them to command armies, rule a kingdom, influence society—but let's not get ahead of ourselves. **Basic** gets you to this point—that is, if you survive it!

For The Game Master

So what does the Game Master (GM) do? Everything.

Your job is harder than the players. Where they create one character, it is your job to create a cast of thousands. The cast is designed to aid or harm the players. They serve rôles as informants, enemies, victims, targets, and clients. They react and act against the players. They pass along needed information or obscure vital information. Besides this cast, it is your job to create the adventures that your players take. You devise the adventure goals, the opponents needed to be overcome, and the ramifications for succeeding or failing at the adventure.

You also act as the referee ensuring the rules are not so much followed, but understood. You decide when to enforce, when to bend, and when to apply them. More importantly you keep everything in balance. By that you make sure each player has a chance to shine, and each player knows the risks and consequences of their actions.

Scared? Don't be. GMing is fun and rewarding. You know all the secrets, and you know all of the player's plots. Even though you know this, part of the fun of being a GM is seeing how events not only play out, but how the players react. GMing has two rules, and these two rules are the key to not only Shadow, Sword & Spell, but to all roleplaying games. Knowing these rules make everything easier.

So what are these rules?

Rule 1: Have Fun.

Simple, I know, but truthfully, very important. If you are not having fun, neither are the players. For example, a player wants to perform numerous actions to try and succeed at a given task. Many of these actions are not covered by the rules, and play is being slowed down by endless arguments over what "can" and "cannot" be done. This is not fun for you, and you can be assured that it is not fun for the other players. In cases like this, let it go. Roll the dice, move the action along, do something, anything, than continue the disagreement.

Rule 2: When In Doubt Go With Your Gut.

To put it simply, when faced with a question, go with your first reaction, often it is the correct way to go. In the example above, if your gut tells you the action the player wants to take has a +10 TN, then go for it. Roll the dice and move along. Shadow, Sword & Spell is a game, and it should be fun. If the players do something unexpected, don't panic. Roll with it and see what happens.

12°

Everything you need to know in order to play Shadow, Sword & Spell is found in this book. The basics found in this chapter should allow you to quickly under-

stand the game's mechanical foundations. Of course, Shadow, Sword & Spell isn't complex. Most rules are fairly straightforward and easy to remember. Nevertheless, there are a handful of occasions when multiple modifiers and special cases come into play. The more you understand the basic rules, the better prepared you'll be to deal with these few exceptions.

Playing The Game

To play Shadow, Sword & Spell you need a few things.

First, two twelve-sided dice (D12). GMs might want to have a few more handy.

A blank piece of paper (or a Character sheet) and a pencil.

A willingness to have fun.

Rules Overview

Action in Shadow, Sword & Spell isn't intended to be "realistic" or "gritty." It's meant to recreate the type of action you're likely to read in books, seen in comic books or manga, or see in a movie or television show. *Note*—Shadow, Sword & Spell is not cartoonish or ridiculously over the top, but the emphasis is on verisimilitude and plausibility rather than a strict reality simulation. The game's rules, known as *12°*, are designed to accommodate this style of play with ease. Action is about doing things in a flashy and larger-than-life way. It is one thing to say your Character is fighting a pack of wolves; it's another to say they are doing so while balancing on a crumbling wall of a famous ruin.

Every action, regardless if your Character is swinging a sword, or intimidating a merchant, is handled the same way. Roll 2d12 and if the result is equal to or less than your Target Number (TN), the action succeeds.

Simple as that.

Your TN is a number based on two associated Abilities or Skills plus or minus any modifiers. For example, if your Character wants to throw a dagger and has an **Quickness** 6 and Throw 6, your TN is 12. Thus, rolling a 2d12 and getting a result of 11 results in a success; rolling 2d12 and getting a 23 results in a failure.

Tests

All actions in Shadow, Sword & Spell are called Tests. There are three types of Tests — Ability, Skill, and Opposed — that depend on specific situations; the Game Master will tell you what type of Test you need to make if it's not obvious.

Ability Tests

Ability Tests depend on one of your Character's Abilities and is used in times of great need or danger. These Tests are not tied to Skills; instead they are tied to your Character's inborn ability to do something. Your Target Number is always the unmodified Rank in your Ability.

For example, suppose your Character is running away from a rampaging dinosaur. You decide to shake your pursuers by declaring your Character is diving into a nearby pond and holding his breath while underwater, hoping the dinosaur does not detect them. Once your Character reaches his limit, your GM tells you to make a Toughness Test, to see if your Character still manages to hold his breath. In this case your TN would be your Character's Toughness Ability (8). Rolling 2d12 the result is 15, failure. Thus your Character fails his Toughness Test and begins drowning.

Skill Tests

Skill Tests are the most common tests found in Shadow, Sword & Spell. Most actions, from shooting a musket to researching a demon, are handled by Skill Tests. Your Target Number in a Skill Test equals your Skill Rank plus the Rank of the Skill's associated Ability, plus or minus any bonus or penalties associated with the Test. The resulting number is the one you need to meet in order to succeed.

For example, your Character is scaling a wall of a wizard's tower. This is normally a Routine Test. Unfortunately; your Character is attempting to climb a wall in the pouring rain while not being spotted by guards patrolling the area. Your Character's Athletics skill is 7 and his Brawn is 6, making your TN 13. Due to the rain and the need for your Character to be silent, your GM assesses your Character a –4 penalty, which lowers your Character's TN to 9 for this Test.

Opposed Tests

Opposed Tests are tests between your Character and another, usually occurring when your Character is competing against another Character or is acting out against a non-player Character of some sort. Opposed Tests are necessary because the degree of your Character's success (or failure) determines how the game's events unfold. Opposed Tests require two or more parties to make a Test; whoever rolls highest, but still below their Target Number, succeeds. Opposed Tests also come into play for some specific skills, such as Stealth, as well as in combat.

An example of an Opposed Test for Stealth would be in the case of hiding. Your Character sneaking into a protected villa. A guard is keeping watch, and the GM states that they have a chance noticing your Character sneaking into the house. The GM tells you to make a Stealth Test; while the GM makes an Observe Test. Rolling the dice your result is a 4 (your TN was 12)—success! The GM,

rolling for the guard (whose TN is 9), rolls a 12—failure. Your Character easily sneaks into the house, while the guard standing watch, fails to notice him.

Success and Failure

As long as you roll a number equal to your Target Number or lower, your Character succeeds at his actions. Anytime you roll higher than your TN, your Character fails. In some cases, your Character may also experience a Dramatic Success or a Dramatic Failure.

Dramatic Success

Anytime you roll a "2" on a 2d12, you score a Dramatic Success. The meaning of a Dramatic Success varies with the type of Test being used. Typically it means your Character has not only succeeded, but did so in a spectacular, memorable fashion. In combat, a Dramatic Success indicates you have dealt your opponent maximum damage for his weapon type, whereas in a Skill Test it indicates that you've achieved all you were attempting and more.

Dramatic Failure

Rolling a "24" on a 2d12 means your Character experiences a Dramatic Failure. What this means is that your Character not only failed their Test, but also performed his action so badly that he has either placed himself in danger or otherwise adversely affected himself (and possibly his companions). In combat, a Dramatic Failure indicates that your sword breaks, while in a Skill Test it indicates that you are either badly mistaken or have failed in such a way so as to make his situation more precarious.

Degrees

As you might expect a game mechanic called *12°*, your Character's degree of success is important. Your degree of success is the amount by which you roll under your Target Number. For example, your Character's TN is 14 and you roll 11, your degree of success is 3. In combat, your degree of success acts as a multiplier to your weapon's base damage.

Using the above example, if your Character is fighting with a sword with a base damage value of 5 and achieved 3 degrees of success, he would deal 15 points of damage to his opponent.

In skill use, degrees of success have a much more "impressionistic" meaning, which is to say, largely up to the GM. Generally, degrees of success either indicate the time factor removed from the task or the increase in its effectiveness. Returning to the above example, a task normally taking 10 rounds take only 7 if you achieve 3 degrees of success. Ultimately, the Game Master is the final arbiter of how degrees of success improve Skill-based tasks, but it should always be an obvious improvement that tracks the degree of success a Character achieve.

Bonus And Penalties

Sometimes, depending on the situation, your Character gains a bonus or penalty to a Test. These modifiers change the Target Number of the Test, making it easier (or harder) for your Character to achieve what you want. Bonuses and penalties are never applied to the die roll; they are added (or subtracted) directly to the TN.
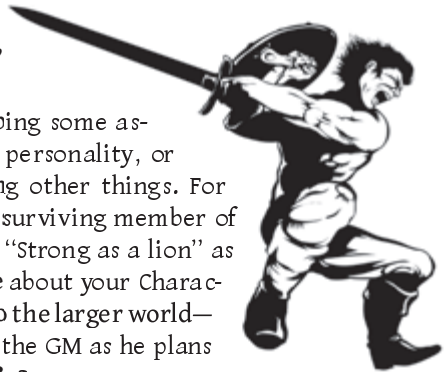
GMs, as they run adventures, determine what the situations are and whether any penalties come into play. For example, suppose you are the GM, and one of your players wants to fire a crossbow while riding a running house. Typically, firing a crossbow is a Routine Task (no modifier), but firing it from a running horse is more challenging. As the GM, you decide that, due to the nature of this task, the player suffers a -3 (Challenging) penalty while firing from a running horse.

Situation	Modifier	Situation	Modifier
Impossible	-6	Feeble	+1
Daring	-5	Easy	+2
Reckless	-4	Trivial	+3
Challenging	-3	Simple	+4
Difficult	-2	Basic	+5
Hard	-1	Instinctive	+6
Routine	±0		

Hooks And Action Points

SHADOW, SWORD & SPELL succeeds, or fails, based on the Characters played. Of course, the Game Master's skill at creating an interesting and fun adventure is almost as important, but it's the Characters and their actions driving the game. To encourage you to create interesting and well-rounded Characters and emphasize their most interesting Characteristics in your adventures, SHADOW, SWORD & SPELL uses Hooks.

Hooks are roleplaying tools describing some aspect of your Character's past history, personality, or connections to other Characters, among other things. For example, a Character might have "Last surviving member of their tribe" or "Bearer of the Mark" or "Strong as a lion" as Hooks. Each of these hooks is suggestive about your Character and possibly about his relationship to the larger world— both of which make them invaluable to the GM as he plans engaging adventures in SHADOW, SWORD & SPELL.

Besides suggesting interesting things about your Character to the GM, hooks have another more immediate benefit: Action Points.

Action Points are dramatic "currency" you acquire by creating Hooks. They can be traded for situational boons, such as bonuses to your Target Number, free re-rolls, and other benefits. Action Points are finite in number, with Characters having no more than 12 at any given time, sometimes less. Action Points can be regained by bringing your hooks to bear in an adventure in ways your GM thinks makes the game more exciting and fun for everyone.

What's Next?

What follows are all the rules and options you will need to run and play your own games of Shadow, Sword & Spell. These rules and options let you create your own games, and you have the freedom to use or ignore what you choose in order to create the style of play you want. This is your game. This is your world. We have given you the tools to have fun. So let's go have some fun!