

G U R P S[®]

FANTASY II

Adventures in the Mad Lands



BY ROBIN D. LAWS

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

In the center of the world is a land hammered by the weather, tortured by insane gods, plagued by grotesque monsters and haunted by magic. Only the bravest survive in the Mad Lands.

Yet they do survive . . . hearty hunters, fishermen and warriors with the courage to face a world in constant turmoil. Clever, self-reliant, they refuse to yield to the land's ever-present threats – chaotic gods, brutal monsters and immortal sorcerers.

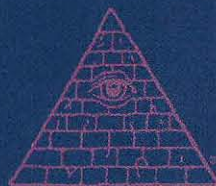
This book has everything the *GURPS* GM needs to run a campaign in the dark-fantasy world of the Mad Lands, including . . .

- ◆ A full-color, fold-out map of the Mad Lands and surrounding areas.
- ◆ Descriptions of neighboring lands, including the bizarre Savarginia, the hostile Togeth and the mysterious Whiteness.
- ◆ A campaign where party members have known each other from birth. Roleplaying and personality development are important. Improve your status through brave deeds, but don't think of back-stabbing . . . your comrades are all that stand between you and the pits of hell.
- ◆ Gods! The chaotic deities who warp the very land and change all they touch. No one worships *these* mad powers. No one *sane*, that is . . .
- ◆ Monsters! The vicious Skinless, the berserk Headless, the sinister Heightless and many more – once human, they now prey on humanity.
- ◆ The Soulless – a race of immortal sorcerers so bored with their endless lives that they will pursue any eccentric activity. And humans make such amusing playthings . . .
- ◆ Rules for incorporating the fickle force of magic into the campaign. In the Mad Lands, magic is unpredictable . . . a thing to be feared.



Here is a land of danger and death, monsters and magic. Adventures here aren't loot-and-pillage – they're battles for mankind's very survival in a world of chaos. Pit your raw courage against foes beyond imagination. Visit the Mad Lands if you dare . . .

Written by Robin D. Laws
Edited by Steve Jackson
Illustrated by John Hartwell
Cover by Rob Prior



STEVE JACKSON GAMES



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GURPS[®] FANTASY II

Adventures in the Mad Lands

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campaign from which *The Mad Lands* grew,
and to the members and readers
of the *Alarums & Excursions* APA.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION3

About GURPS 3

About the Author 3

THE LAND4

Terrain 5

Climate and Seasons 5

The Night Sky 5

Flora 7

Bordering Lands 7

Togeth 7

The Whiteness 9

The Northern Tribelands:

Land of the Questers 10

Savarginia 12

The Greater World 13

The Cities of Savarginia 13

MADLANDER CULTURE14

Economics 15

Foreign Trade 15

Fishers and Hunters:

The Great Rivalry 16

Fisher/Hunter Jokes 16

Cultural Values 17

Proverbs 17

Sense of Humor 17

Invective 18

Gender Roles 18

Gender Change 19

Sexual Mores 20

Social Organization 20

Leadership Traits 20

Aging 21

Dispute Settlement 22

Living Scared 22

Ceremonies 22

Enforcement 22

Concepts of Causation 23

Mythology and Folklore 24

Zo Do Wabda Tales 25

"Zo Do Wabda and

the Dream of Doom" 25

Inventing New Zo Do Wabda Tales 26

Other Tales 27

Language and Nomenclature 28

Hunting Signals 28

Why It's Called "The Mad Lands" 29

DAILY LIFE30

Hunting Expeditions 31

Dangers of the Hunt 31

Fishing Expeditions 32

Dangers of the Sea 32

Life in the Wavobak 33

Food and Drink 34

Medicinal Tubers 34

Architecture 36

Builder's Pride 36

Jewelry and Ornamentation 37

Tech Level 38

Hairstyles 38

Boatbuilding 39

Costume 40

Typical Songs 39

Music 40

Feasts and Festivals 40

Games and Sports 41

Gambling Without Money 42

CHARACTERS43

Creating Distinctive PCs 44

The People 44

Point Costs 45

Appearance 45

Wealth 45

Status 45

Height and Weight 45

Clans 45

Advantages, Disadvantages and Skills ... 46

Reputation 46

Changing Status Levels 46

Advantages 47

Disadvantages 48

Skills 51

Jobs 52

Equipment 52

THE GODS53

Bax Powu Kag (the Moose) 54

Bett Agwo (the Hare) 54

Meeting the Gods 54

Summoning the Gods 55

Bubzavav (the Bear) 56

GMin God Behavior 56

Dopod Abwep (the Child) 57

Gakox Pezep (the Cougar) 57

Unholy Places 57

Kikavo Vo (Big Leaper) 58

Kikavo Dat (Little Leaper) 59

Vuvuti (the Owl) 60

Realms of the Gods 60

Zewa Zab (the Gopher) 61

Zuutak (the Pig) 62

Gods and Boundaries 62

MONSTERS AND BEASTS .. 63

Monstrous Origins 64

Using Monsters 64

Monsters 65

Bloodless 65

Boneless 66

Faceless 67

Fleshless 68

Footless 68

Ghosts and Undead 69

Headless 70

Heightless 71

Skinless 72

Soundless 73

Weightless 74

MAD LANDS BESTIARY74

Wildlife 74

Mutant Animals 78

THE SOULLESS79

Encountering the Soulless 80

Defining the Soulless 80

Madlander Knowledge of the Soulless 80

Cultural Values 81

A Sorcerous Economy 82

The Metal Cities 82

Soulless Philosophy 82

Portals to the Soulless Realm 83

Politics 84

Social Organization 85

Dispute Resolution 85

Ceremonies 86

Interactions with the Gods 86

Knowledge and History 87

Literature 87

Language and Nomenclature 89

Clothing 89

Changeling Raids 90

Theater and Spectacle 91

Birth and Death 91

Weapons and Armor 92

Character Creation 92

Roleplaying Soulless 92

Deviant Soulless 92

SHAMANISM AND SORCERY93

Magic in the Mad Lands:

Unnatural Laws 94

Mysterious Magic 94

Shamanism 95

Attitudes Toward Shamanism 95

God-Touched Shamans 96

Are There "Good" Shamans? 97

Sorcery 98

The Shamanic Network 98

New Shamanic Characters 99

Epic Sorcery 99

Gem Injection Sorcery 100

Acquiring Gems 101

Addictive Sorcery 101

Sacrificial Sorcery 102

Attitudes Toward Sorcery 102

Sorcerous Training 103

Sacrificing Other Creatures 104

Singing Sorcery 105

Sorcerous Rivalries 105

Magical Vocal Groups 106

The Critical Academy 106

Other Magics 107

Ghostly Powers 107

Foreign Magics 107

History of Sorcery 108

CAMPAIGNS109

Encouraging Characterization 109

The Mad Lands on Yrth 109

Plot Outlines 110

Nectar of the Gods 110

The Adoptee 110

Fish Food 111

Togeth on Yrth 111

The Name 112

Rescue Mission 112

Timelines: Yrth vs. the Mad Lands 112

Ghost Ship 113

Transcending the Background 113

Crossover Campaigns 113

THE VILLAGE OF KAWA TOK114

Kawa Tok 115

Clan Elders 115

Kawa Tok 115

Village Notables 121

Hunters and Fishers 124

Village Women 125

Kawa Tok and Surrounding Area 126

GLOSSARY127

INDEX128

INTRODUCTION

The Mad Lands rise like a rock leviathan from the dark and turbulent sea. The coastline reaches out into the cold water with thousands of crooked fingers; these are fjords and inlets carved millennia ago when glaciers scraped across the land's surface, doing battle with its hard igneous rock.

Yet there are signs of life. Nestled in the jagged arms of the fjords are settlements. Long wooden buildings rest on whatever flat planes the rock grudgingly provides. Smoke rises from a rudimentary smithy. Women tend small terraced gardens. Men sit on meager slivers of beach where the land meets the sea, repairing surprisingly large and sturdy-looking boats. Children race sure-footedly along the sharp and slippery rock faces, laughing and screaming with delight.

Anywhere people can live, they will live. And the Mad Lands do support human life. But it is a tough life rife with dangers. Not only is the land distant and isolated, with a punishing climate and cruel terrain; it is haunted as well. And the things that haunt it are no mere ghosts and monsters – though the Mad Lands have at least their share of these – but gods. This place is too close to the gods, or too close to the wrong sort of gods. They are bizarre in aspect, and capricious or downright predatory in action. Some of them are monstrous versions of familiar animals; others are hideous mixtures of features only a madman would combine. People do not worship the gods here – they fear them, avoiding them if possible and being destroyed by them if not. Those destroyed by the gods may not be merely blasted into oblivion – often, they are robbed of their humanity. They become monsters, threatening the lives of former friends and loved ones. The

constant attacks by the supernatural have shaped the Madlander culture. Its ideas of proper behavior, virtue and even what it means to be human are all molded by the specter of doom . . . doom from mad gods that are worse than any demons.

But despite it all the Madlanders keep their nobility, courage, and a fatalistic sense of humor. This is a land where simple survival takes heroism. There may be conflicts in a Madlander party, but there will be no treachery. When every living (and undead) creature is a danger, any true human is a precious ally, no matter what a pest he may be in the village!

Players in a *Mad Lands* campaign build characters fit for the heroic act of survival, protecting their fellow villagers from the terrible threats that menace the land – crazed foreigners, inhuman sorcerers, and various monsters. They fight, not for riches or power, but because they must. Humanity endures.

Enter a dark fantasy, where mankind is weak, but never merely a pawn. Confront monsters and worse, to die fighting for your people, or to triumph by living for one more day. Confront the mystery, the horror and the grandeur that are the Mad Lands . . .



About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of the *GURPS* system. Our address is SJ Games, Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! Resources now available include:

Roleplayer. This bimonthly magazine includes new rules, variants, new races, beasts, information on upcoming releases, scenario ideas and more. Ask your game retailer, or write for subscription information.

New supplements and adventures. We're always working on new material, and we'll be happy to let you know what's available. A current catalog is available for an SASE.

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Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set*, Third Edition. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to a page in the *Basic Set* – e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the *Basic Set*, Third Edition. Page references beginning with M refer to *GURPS Magic*.

About the Author

Robin Laws lives in Toronto with his wife, Valerie. Previous writing assignments include a several-year stint as movie reviewer for radio station CHAY-FM. His children's play, *The Monsters Under the Bed*, has received several productions. (Don't worry – they're not skinless or anything.) In the world of roleplaying, Robin recently contributed design material to Atlas Games' *Over the Edge*. *GURPS Fantasy II* is his first book. His next project is *Unauthorized Broadcast*, an *Over the Edge* adventure.

Portions of this book originally appeared in slightly different form in the gaming APA *Alarums and Excursions*.

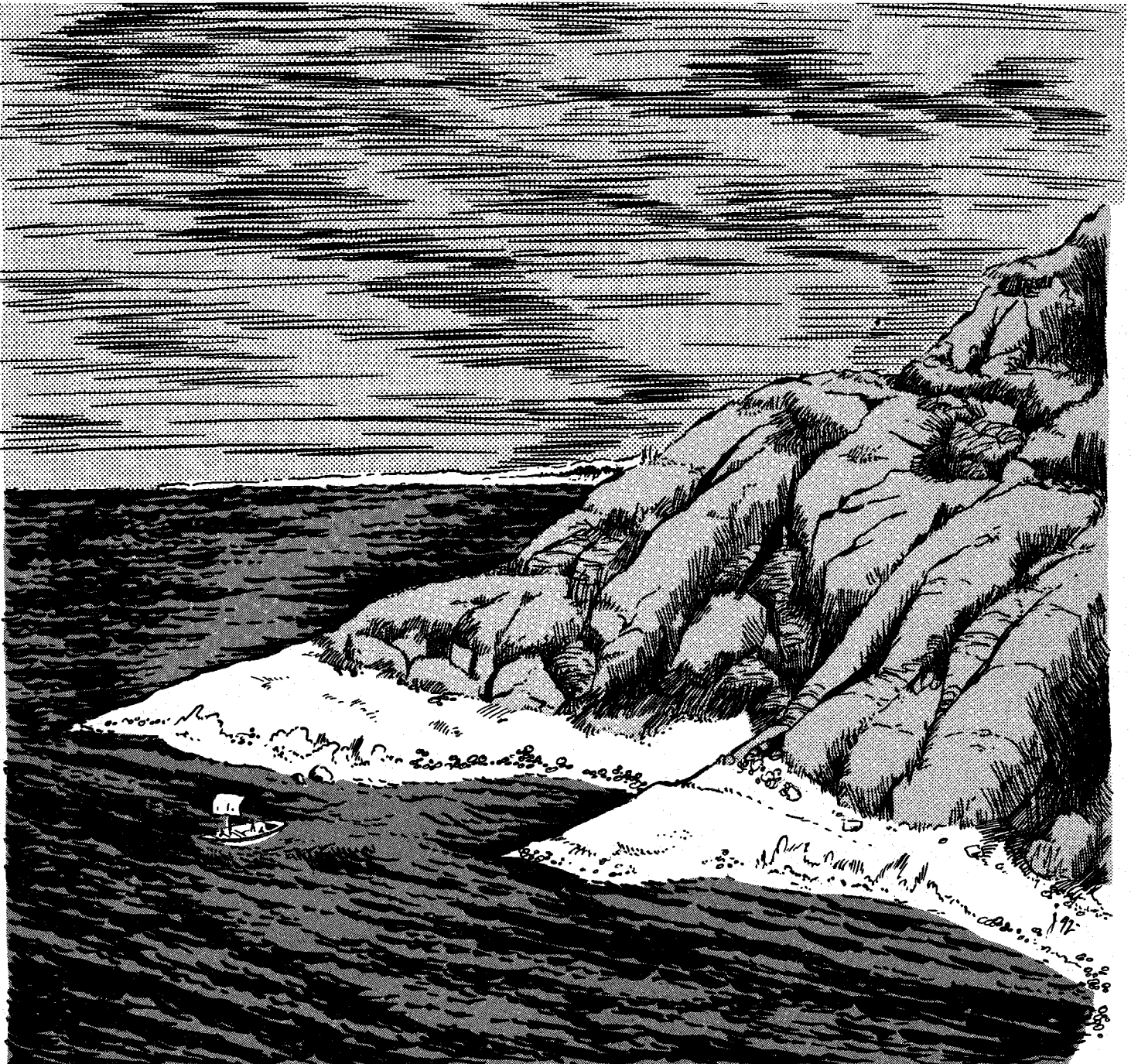
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THE LAND

The Mad Lands are a tough place to live. The terrain is all sharp edges, the climate a contrast of extremes. Grudgingly, it provides the essentials for living: tiny patches of arable land and a population of game animals. The turbulent sea exacts its own price for its treasure, a rich stock of edible fish.

Isolated in a forgotten corner of their world, the Madlanders maintain their way of life with little influence from outsiders. Those few visitors who straggle here are viewed with suspicion, much of it deserved.

Most importantly, a look at the physical details of the Mad Lands – the bizarre night sky, the strange craters and tunnels – reveals the marks left by the unpredictable deities whose madness shapes this place.



Terrain

At base, the Mad Lands are a vast expanse of ancient igneous rock, thinly blanketed with soil. The rock is mostly granite of an unusual color, nearly as dark as slate. Some of it, particularly in the interior and northern regions, is shot through with quartz and other crystalline rock. These veins range in color from deepest black to pink to cloudy white.

The landscape has been marked by repeated glaciation, the most obvious examples being the fjords that reach out into the sea from the Mad Lands' southern coast. Foreign map makers have compared them to the fingers of an arthritic giant. The glaciers have left various odd features behind them, notably eskers, drumlins and moraines. Eskers are ridges of gravel, often three to four miles wide; they can twist across the landscape in a snake-like pattern for dozens of miles. Drumlins are elliptical hills that rise from the earth like giant half-eggs; they're usually found in swarms, their narrow ends pointing to the southeast. Moraines are odd-shaped ridges of rocks, clay and other sediments.

In addition to scratching, gouging, and otherwise sharpening the rocks they grind against, retreating glaciers leave behind rock from elsewhere. This has given the Mad Lands many eerie formations, from mysterious piles of gravel sitting neatly in the middle of nowhere to monolithic chunks of rock perched enigmatically on cliff sides, in ravines, or in the middle of scrub plains.

A second, more unusual force acts to modify local features, placing them in surprising places and disrupting natural patterns. The central fact about the Mad Lands is that they are home to a number of unpredictable, dangerous gods (see *The Gods*, pp. 53-62). When these beings physically manifest themselves, they often violently change the terrain. Three of the gods often travel in large leaps, and they can land with enough force to break down a cliff side or shatter a hilltop. Gakox Pezep, the most prodigious of the leaping gods, typically leaves a trail of craters in his wake. Most of the Mad Lands' lakes – invariably small and unnaturally round – were originally Gakox Pezep impact craters that have since filled with water.

Another god whose activities have greatly altered the landscape is the gopher god, Zewa Zab, who over thousands of years has burrowed countless tunnels through the bedrock. Some of these have since collapsed, becoming ravines of varying sizes. Others have since filled with water, becoming fast-running streams or rivers.

The other gods, as well, have added terrain features – many of them strange and irrational. The laws of nature can be permanently suspended by the supernatural residue the gods leave behind them. Some of Zewa Zab's rivers run uphill, for example. Others run for a while, are interrupted by some other formation, and then pick up again miles away. It is said that one particular uphill river in a remote northern location features a reverse waterfall.

Climate and Seasons

The Mad Lands' climate is comparable to northern temperate regions on Earth, but is subject to great extremes. Madlanders expect punishing weather conditions and grow nervous when a stretch of mild weather continues for too long. A lengthy lull means a ferocious storm to come.

Winter. Madlander winters arrive quickly and take their time leaving – usually they last about five months. Temperatures are very cold, the average being 0°. A very mild winter day might have a high of 28°; on the coldest days temperatures can dip as far as -20°. Humidity is high, making for a damp cold that seeps into the bones. High wind-chill factors can double or even triple discomfort levels and



The Night Sky

The night sky of the Mad Lands is as peculiar as the features of their landscape. The stars appear in no discernible pattern from night to night. There are no commonly recognized constellations, no bright stars to navigate by. One night the sky can be dominated by huge and elaborate swirls of stars; the next a few lone specks of light might hide off in a corner near the horizon.

The exception to this is the moon, which progresses across the sky in a predictable way, and waxes and wanes according to the same cycle as our Earth moon. Madlanders call the moon "Hunter's Friend" and refer to it as male. This is a figure of speech only; they don't think the moon is an intelligent being.

Astronomers from other parts of the world become extremely distressed when visiting the Mad Lands; the randomness of the stars tends to put their basic assumptions about the universe into question. Madlanders are more sanguine about the behavior of their stars – they've never learned to expect regularity in the heavens.

There are, however, occasions when the contents of the sky are alarming to natives. Sometimes the stars appear in an obviously representational pattern: a face, an object, or (most terrifying of all) an image of one of the gods. In the Mad Lands, any omen is a bad omen, and most people refuse to go out on a night when the stars carry such a message.

The night sky is completely different when viewed from a vessel on the ocean. From the sea there are recognizable constellations that move at a slow regular rate through the sky from night to night, and a pair of bright stars that can be used for navigational purposes. Some Madlanders have reasoned that this is proof that the gods control the arrangement of stars over the mainland – as is well known, the gods have no dominion over the sea.

This phenomena can be used by GMs to create atmosphere or reflect the story's theme. Make the contents of the sky obliquely mirror the mood of the adventure. If the scenario has sufficiently cosmic overtones, the sky might even provide important clues. Like any device, this should not be overused.

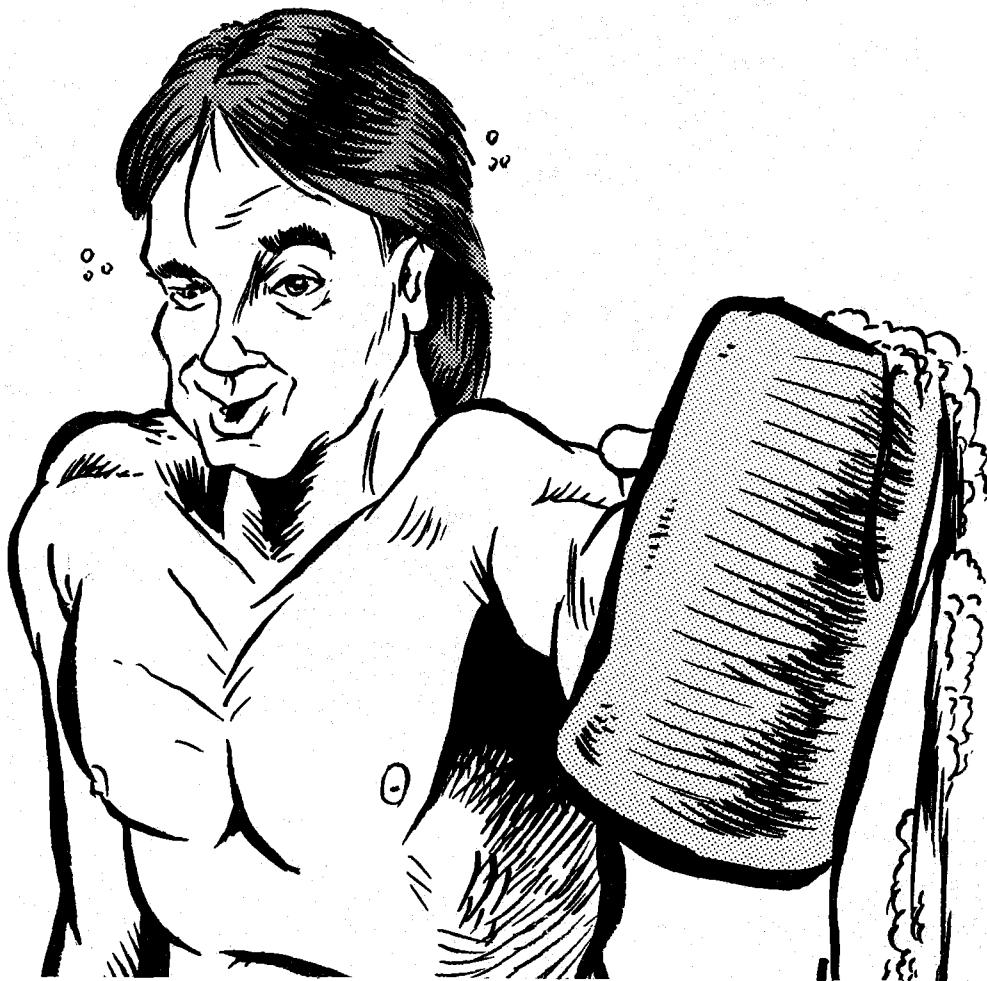
The People

Physically, Madlanders are a smallish, stocky people. Average height is 5'5" for men and 5'3" for women. They have thick, sturdy skeletons. The average individual is muscular and physically fit; over- or under-weight types have a lower chance of survival. They're also subject to cultural prejudice.

Skin color ranges from olive to light brown. Hair is usually black, occasionally brown. Straight hair is the norm; some folks have large natural waves. Eye color is usually brown, with a smattering of greens and hazels. Blond hair and blue eyes do turn up, although both are extremely rare. Children with either may be suspected of being soulless changelings (see p. 91) and may be killed; this might explain why these features don't often surface from the gene pool. Tightly curled hair is similarly feared. Men do not grow facial hair, though some very old men develop wispy white mustaches and chin whiskers. Body hair is sparse in men of all ages.

Madlanders tend toward blunt, flattened facial features. Cheekbones are generally high and wide. Under the eyes is a layer of fatty tissue that gives the Madlander a perpetual squint; this is a natural protection from the bright sun of summer and its reflection from the winter snows. Otherwise the Madlander face is often on the gaunt side, with skin tight over bone and facial muscle. Lips are small and thin. Again, babies with sharper than normal features may be taken for changelings and killed at birth.

Wrinkles and creases begin to appear on the faces of Madlander men around age 20; women, whose tasks don't expose them to the elements as much, start to wrinkle around 35. Scars are another common feature of Madlander faces and bodies; again, this is true of men more than women. Scars are considered attractive on a man; they show experience.



Creating Distinctive PCs

Instead of a party consisting of a wizard, a warrior, a priest and an assassin, a group of Madlander PCs might be differentiated as the storyteller, the hunter, the fisher, and the agile one. More importantly, an interesting *Mad Lands* campaign depends on creating unique personalities for each player character. Skills and attributes become less important: the crucial choices are of vivid character traits. Eventually that same Madlander party might better be described as the thinker, the forgetful one, the troubled one, and the happy-go-lucky guy.

GMs embarking on a *Mad Lands* campaign can help players find these subtle ways of differentiating their characters. Ask players to submit, along with each new character sheet, a biographical sketch a page or two in length. This shouldn't be used to set the PCs' personalities in stone . . . often the most interesting bits of characterization evolve during play. The idea is simply to invite each player to think about his hero's personality before the game, to lay the groundwork for the three-dimensional portrayal that should emerge as the campaign progresses.

GMs can foster the sense of a pre-existing group interrelated in complex ways. A Madlander party will have an extensive background – its members are people from the same village who have known each other all their lives. The PCs will already have a rich well of shared experience before the first story begins. They will know everything about their fellows except their deepest secrets. Each party member will know the advantages, disadvantages, and skills of his friends as well as his own. Accordingly, just after – or better yet, *during* – character creation, players should pass their character sheets around. They can then relate their PCs' respective traits to one another, inventing anecdotes from the past to explain them. Quirks can cement relationships among the party members. For example, if one PC suffers from Overconfidence, another player might give his



Throwing a captured heightless into the ocean works only if its vulnerability is to drowning; it will lose any shamanic powers while it's past the boundaries of the Mad Lands, but maintains its immortality. It's not clear whether a heightless would eventually lose this if it stayed past the boundaries for a long period – they don't seem to cross them willingly.

Psychological Damage

A community which loses people to a heightless will be possessed by feelings of anger and helplessness. They'll see danger in every corner, haunted by the fact that anyone could be seconds away from falling into an elaborate death trap. If the heightless is still actually stalking villagers, this is self-preserving, not crazy. But these fears can linger even after a heightless has been slain.

Creating Heightless

To build a heightless, start with a normal human character. Add 50% to IQ and quadruple the existing points devoted to each mental skill. Double points in each physical skill. If the character has any advantages that come in levels, double the levels.

Skinless

The skinless live on as monsters after having their skin stripped off by divine contact. Their exposed muscle tissue glistens red in the sunlight; on some specimens, moist bags of yellow fat hang from it. Behind them, the skinless leave a trail of their own blood, which forever drips from open capillaries. Larger veins and arteries thread around their bodies like pulsing ropes.

Skinless retain their intelligence after transformation. Unlike most other monsters, they also continue to require food and shelter. They view humans as natural enemies, competitors for a limited supply of game and prime living places. Skinless try to kill any human hunters they run across. They also stage raids on villages to get food and supplies. Attacks against humans are motivated by emotion as well as economics. The skinless condition is one of constant low-level pain; although they become used to this, it does make them perpetually bitter and irritable. Ripping the life out of a smugly skin-covered human is one of the few true pleasures in skinless existence.

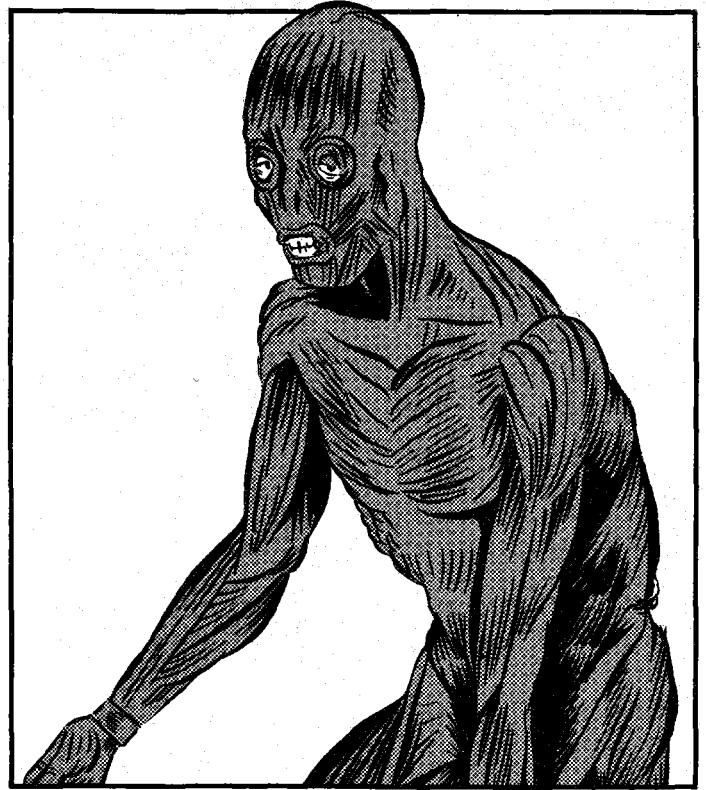
Skinless tend to develop singular obsessions, like greed, envy, megalomania, alcoholism, compulsive lying, uncontrollable tempers or a taste for human flesh. Others are seized by quirkier obsessions: rock collecting, endless tuneless whistling, alliterative or rhyming speech, or a need to constantly tell unfunny, brain-damaged jokes. Not all skinless will be consumed by their lunacies: many will be able to control them except in particular rare instances.

Although skinless often form groups for their mutual benefit, they follow no set social structure. Each group has its own distinct set-up, determined by its leader. Skinless are attracted to charismatic leaders, charisma being defined as intelligence, ruthlessness and personal power. Some leaders have been known to set up a complex set of laws for their subjects to follow; others rule by the whim of the moment. Most individual leaders keep only a small, manageable number of followers. But every so often a more ambitious type tries to form a vast skinless empire, with a hierarchy of lesser leaders under his command. Bands of skinless may be nomadic, or may defend one particular stronghold. They may erect primitive buildings, or rely on natural features like caves and tunnels.

The usual gang of divine suspects is behind the creation of skinless: Gakox Pezep and Bubzavav create them by eating the skin off their victims. Dopod Abwep does the same with a caress.

In fact, it is thought that getting too close to the physical manifestation of *any* Madlander deity can burn off all skin.

The skinless themselves can convert humans to their kind. To do this, they must capture their prey alive and subject him to a lengthy ritual of preparation. At its height, the victim is skinned alive as drumming and chanting reaches an ecstatic climax. He then goes into shock; if he survives (makes a successful HT roll) he recovers as a skinless. The ritual requires the participation of over a dozen skinless, so it can only be done by larger groups.



This ritual can be slightly altered to an even more sinister end. Again, the victim is skinned alive, but is kept continually conscious by shamanic means. Though technically remaining human, the subject is likely to go irrevocably mad from the pain in short order. Meanwhile, the skinless have his skin, which has been painstakingly removed in a single piece: it can be worn as magical disguise, allowing the skinless to pose as its former owner. As long as the skinless is reasonably close to the victim's height and weight, the only clue to the imposture is a very slight sagging of skin around the neck. (Some tales suggest that the headpiece is separate and can be removed at will, which accounts for the wrinkling.) Matching victim to impostor is usually not difficult; remember that Madlanders have a far narrower range of heights and weights than moderns do. Skinless use these disguises to infiltrate villages, often to set them up for raids. The skin remains useful as long as the victim is kept alive back at the skinless enclave; if the victim is put out of his misery, the disguise immediately melts into a pool of slime. Theoretically the victim can be kept alive forever, gibbering in nonstop agony. If they wish to, skinless can discard the skin at any point and perform the necessary ritual to turn the victim into a skinless himself. This is usually done only to victims who have been "skin donors" only for a short period of time; long-term donors will likely be too mad to be of any use.

Madlander misfits can also turn skinless. Self-centered whiners and complainers, self-pitying sorts unable to roll with

life's punches and prickly types who are quick to take offense are all at risk. Anyone who exaggerates these traits to the point of making life unbearable for the rest of the community might one day wake up without an epidermis.

Skinless are physically powerful – enough to slay a man with a single barehanded blow – and can take a great deal of damage before keeling over. Most have shamanic powers: skinless have learned the secrets of shamanic initiation, and those who have gained powers from the gods can teach them to others. They're less active in winter: freezing temperatures make their blood flow sluggishly, and doubles the pain they usually feel. They try to spend their winters in shelters kept hot by roaring fires, where they can avoid this effect. Madlanders planning to attack skinless will wait until winter if possible.

Psychological Damage

People who meet the skinless might afterwards suffer psychosomatic aches and pains or unrelievable itches. They might become convinced that other villagers are skinless in disguise, either fixating on and harassing one individual, or deciding that the entire village has turned. Equally possible is a delusion in which the victim feels his own skin is loosening and is about to slither off and abandon him.

Creating Skinless

Triple ST and hit points of a normal human. Add a new mental disadvantage or two, possibly creating new and outlandish ones. Remove all inappropriate skills and advantages, and put the points into magical aptitude and shamanic powers. For skinless who have been monsters for a long time, double or triple that number. When outdoors in freezing temperatures, a skinless' normal ST and hit points are reduced by one third, and DX by half.

Soundless

ST: 3	Speed: 10 (torso 5)	Size: 1 hex
DX: 14	PD/DR: 0/0	Weight: 5 lbs. (head)
IQ: 4	Damage: bite 1d-3	10-15 lbs. (limbs)
HT: 1d+8	+ poison	50-200 lbs. (torso)

Soundless are excellent trackers, performing at IQ+3d.

The soundless are so named because they can creep through any terrain in absolute silence – they never snap a twig or roll a pebble, even in full flight. These small creatures rely on stealth to surprise much larger prey; if confronted they use speed to dodge or flee. Soundless hunt together in small colonies, usually with five members; a sixth member will be hiding nearby. Each colony was originally a single human being dismembered in an encounter with a god. Now all the parts – head, torso, and four limbs – are separate ambulatory monsters. Each part sprouts four long and spindly but powerful legs, like those of a fox. The torso and limbs grow sensory organs: they appear on the soles of the feet, the palms of the hands, and, on the torso, at the neck. The eyes are small, dark and beady. The nostrils are mere slits; the ears, small round membranes like those of a frog. Their mouths are lined with tiny needle-sharp teeth, hollow and full of poison. Each develops its own digestive and circulatory system. They grow a layer of downy gray fur of a shade that makes them very hard to see in the dark.

Soundless act on instinct. Exclusively carnivorous, they're expert trackers willing to follow their quarry over great distances, for weeks at a time, until an ideal moment to attack. If possible, they'll move in while their prey sleeps. The torso member of the colony, which is slower and a larger target, will hang back from the initial attack. Instead, it will be searching the local terrain for

a suitable hidey-hole. After making the kill, the others tear apart the corpse and drag the pieces to this lair. The members of each colony have a psychic link to one another: they follow the torso's mental trail to find the temporary nest. There they gorge themselves on their kill. After eating, the soundless will be torpid and hideously bloated with food. They remain in this state of conscious quasi-hibernation for four to six weeks, and then abandon the lair and hit the trail in search of another victim.

If one of them is threatened, the rest of the colony comes to its defense. The group won't flee if it means leaving a member behind. If one is captured, the rest stalk its captors until a chance to free it arrives. All soundless behavior can be traced to the twin drives for food and protection of the rest of the colony.

Their psychic link is almost a group mind. Colonies seem to act as one entity. When attacked by a group of soundless, many hunters instinctively go after the walking head, thinking it will be the "brains" of the colony. In reality, no colony member is more dispensable than others.



Victims torn to pieces by any god are prone to return as groups of soundless. Gakox Pezep, Kikavo Dat and Bubzavav, as usual, are the most likely to do this. Some victims literally fall to pieces when they see a particularly disturbing image in Vuvuti's eyes.

If any members of a colony are killed, the survivors set about replacing them. This means finding a human target. If a particular human was responsible for the deaths of their brothers, they'll track him tirelessly. If not, they'll look for the nearest and easiest person to attack. They stalk and kill the victim as normal, but will not eat the part or parts corresponding to slain colony members. Soundless have two separate poison sacs. One poison type they use to paralyze their prey. The other, used in this situation, magically transforms a severed body part into a new soundless. The other soundless guard the body part for the several days it takes to transform; only then do they eat the unused portions of the body, giving the newborn first crack at it.

People who selfishly withdraw from their communities and refuse to share their wisdom and skills may, if their withdrawal leads to some sufficiently awful disaster, find themselves growing gray fur. If they do not mend their ways, they'll one day fall into a seizure and split apart into pieces, which will immediately sprout legs and scamper off into the wilderness.

Soundless have no supernatural abilities apart from their automatic success at all Stealth attempts, and the poison that converts body parts into soundless. Their other poison is a paralytic agent that reduces a victim's DX by 1d-2 per turn. When DX reaches 0,

INDEX

- Addiction disadvantage, 48-49;
gem addiction, 101.
 Advantages, 46-48.
 Age, 21.
 Agexa (headstrong young woman), 126.
 Akik Takivodd (cowardly hunter), 124.
 Alcohol, 36, 110.
 Alcoholism disadvantage, 49.
 Animals, 74-78; animals, *domesticated*, 51, 52; *sacrificial*, 103-105.
 Appearance, 20, 44, 45.
 Awoxig (village elder), 115.
 Badew E (village cook), 121.
 Bapex Bowev (lecherous sailor), 125.
 Bax Powu Kag, 54; *see also* *Gods*.
 Baxabob (village elder), 116.
 Bear, 77; *see also* *Bubzavav*.
 Beauty, 20.
 Beetle wrestling, 42; *see also* *Vedodit*.
 Bett Agwo, 54-56, 98; *see also* *Gods*.
 Bibavov (expert fisher), 122.
 Birth, 22.
 Bloodless, 65-66.
 Boatbuilding, 39-40; *see also* *Fishing*, *Sea*.
 Bokadwex (village elder), 116.
 Boneless, 66-67.
 Bubxavav, 34, 56-57, 64; *see also* *Gods*.
 Buzavo Bako (village elder), 117.
 Carpenters, 36.
 Ceremonies, 22; *soulless*, 86.
 Characters, 43-52; *point costs*, 45; *shamanic*, 99; *soulless*, 92.
 Clans, 22, *clan names*, 45.
 Clerical Investment advantage, 47.
 Climate, 5-7.
 Clothing, 40; *soulless*, 89-91.
 Code of Honor disadvantage, 49.
 Cougar, 78; *see also* *Gakox Pezep*.
 Crafts, 15, 38.
 Culture, *Madlander*, 14-29; *soulless*, 79-92; *see also* *Togeth*, *Sap Cid*, *Northern Tribelands*, *Savarginia*.
 Cursed disadvantage, 50.
 Cyberpunk campaign, 113.
 Dako Okked (village elder), 117.
 Death, 23; *see also* *Ghosts*, *Undead*.
 Deer, 75.
 Desire snake, 78.
 Disputes, 22.
 Dopod Abwep, 57; *see also* *Gods*.
 Drugs, 48-49.
 Drumlins, 5.
 Dwarfism disadvantage, 49.
 Economics, 15; *soulless*, ??.
 Elders, 21, 22, 115-120.
 Epic sorcery, 99-100, 111.
 Epilepsy disadvantage, 49.
 Eskers, 5.
 Faceless, 67-68.
 Fat disadvantage, 49.
 Festivals, 41; *soulless*, 86.
 Fishing, 17, 32-34, 51; *fishing gear*, 52.
 Fleshless, 68.
 Folklore, 24-28.
 Food, 34-36.
 Footless, 68-69.
 Forest, 7.
 Fright Checks, 65.
 Gakox Pezep, 5, 7, 57-58, 64; *see also* *Gods*.
 Gambling, 42.
 Games, 41.
 Gem injection sorcery, 100-102.
 Gender change, 9.
 Gender roles, 18-19.
 Gesture and signals, 28, 29.
 Gevo, 7.
 Ghosts, 23, 69-70, 78; *magic*, 107.
 Glaciers, 5.
 Gluttony disadvantage, 49.
 Gods, 53-62; *and shamans*, 95-98; *and the soulless*, 87; *boundaries*, 62; *leaping*, 5; *list*, 127; *summoning*, 55.
 Greed disadvantage, 49.
 Hair, 38, 44.
 Harpoon skill, 52.
 Headless, 70-71.
 Heightless, 37, 71-72.
 History, 24.
 Horror campaign, 113.
 Hospitality, 16.
 Humor, 16-17.
 Hunter-fisher rivalry, 16.
 Hunting, 17, 28, 31-32, 51; *hunting gear*, 52.
 Ignorance disadvantage, 51.
 Insults, 18.
 Intolerance disadvantage, 50.
 Ironworking, 38.
 Jewelry, 37.
 Jokes, 16-17.
 Kawa Tok (village), 115-126.
 Ke Ke Gi (village elder), 119.
 Ki Zi (village storyteller), 121.
 Kikavo Dat, 59-60, 98; *see also* *Gods*.
 Kikavo Vo, 58-59, 110; *see also* *Gods*.
 Kikex Povigig (village elder), 118.
 Killer whale, 32, 39, 77.
 Kleptomania disadvantage, 50.
 Kuda Ke (village elder), 118.
 Language, 28; *soulless*, 88-89.
 Leadership skill, 34.
 Leadership, 20.
 Legal Enforcement Powers advantage, 47.
 Literacy advantage/disadvantage, 47; *as sorcery*, 100.
 Literature skill, 51.
 Longhouse, *see* *Wavobak*.
 Luck advantage, 47.
 Magery advantage/disadvantage, 47, 50; *see also* *Shamanic Initiation*.
 Magic, 47, 107; *ghostly*, 107; *GM-controlled*, 94; *mana levels*, 107; *new types*, 107, 108; *see also* *Shamanism*, *Sorcery*.
 Magical Resistance advantage, 47.
 Mana, 107.
 Marriage, 23.
 Mathematical Ability advantage, 47.
 Metal Cities, 82-84.
 Military Rank advantage, 47.
 Monsters, 63-74; *origins*, 64.
 Moon, 5.
 Moose, 76; *see also* *Bax Powu Kag*.
 Moraines, 5.
 Mountain lion, 78; *see also* *Gakox Pezep*.
 Music, 39, 40-41.
 Mythology, 24-28.
 Names, 28-29.
 Northern Tribelands, 10-12; *magic*, 108.
 O Biki (village madman), 122.
 Odious Personal Habit disadvantage, 50.
 Ownership, 15; *see* *Wedo*.
 Pa Pa Zatod (village elder), 119.
 Pa Upet (cheerful young woman), 126.
 Patron advantage, 47.
 Pigdogs, 77.
 Plants, 7.
 Plot outlines, 110-113.
 Pogox (village hero), 122.
 Porcupine, 77.
 Poverty disadvantage, 50; *see* *Wealth*.
 Primitive disadvantage, 50.
 Proverbs, 17-18.
 Questers, *see* *Northern Tribelands*.
 Raccoonalisk, 78.
 Reputation, 46, 50.
 Ritual, 22.
 Sacrificial sorcery, 102-105.
 Sap Cid, 9-10, 111.
 Savarginia, 9, 11, 12-13, 15; *magic*, 108.
 Sea, 23, 32-34.
 Seals, 32, 33, 48, 75, 111; *unintelligent*, 76.
 Sex, 9, 18-19, 20.
 Shamanic Initiation advantage, 51.
 Shamanic powers, 96-98.
 Shamanism, 93-98; *good shamans*, 97.
 Singing sorcery, 105-107.
 Skills, 51; *expected skills*, 51.
 Skinless, 72-73.
 Skunk, 76.
 Sky, 5.
 Social organization, 20.
 Social Stigma disadvantage, 50.
 Songs, 39, 40-41.
 Sorcery, 93-95, 98-108; *Epic sorcery*, 99-100, 111; *gem injection*, 100-102; *sacrificial*, 102-105; *singing*, 105-107; *training*, 105.
 Soulless, 79-92; *and the gods*, 86; *ceremonies*, 87; *character creation*, 92; *cities*, 82-84; *clothing*, 89-91; *culture*, 81, 85-86; *economy*, 82; *history*, 87; *language*, 88, 89; *literature*, 87, 100; *origin*, 80; *philosophy*, 82; *politics*, 84; *portals*, 83; *The Epic*, 99-100, 106; *The Street*, 82-84; *weapons*, 92.
 Soundless, 73-74.
 Special Ops campaign, 113.
 Sports, 41.
 Squid, 78.
 Squirrels, 77.
 Status, 45, 46, 50.
 Street, The, 82-84.
 Supers campaign, 113.
 Terrain, 5.
 Togeth, 7-9; *on Yrth*, 111; *magic*, 108.
 Totewug, 7.
 Trade, 15.
 Trees, 7.
 Tribunal, 22.
 Trophies, 37.
 Trouble Fish game, 41, 42.
 Tubers, 15, 34, 35.
 Undead, 69-70.
 Unfazeable advantage, 48.
 Unholy places, 57.
 Unusual Background advantage, 48.
 Vedodit Training skill, 52.
 Vidigi, 24-28.
 Villages, 15, 21-22; *sample village*, 114.
 Vode Vove (suspected shaman), 123.
 Vole Training skill, 52.
 Vuvuti, 60-61; *see also* *Gods*.
 Wapu Vowike (village elder), 120.
 Wavobak, 33, 36-38.
 Wealth, 15, 45; *soulless*, 82.
 Weapons, 52; *soulless*, 92.
 Weather, 5-7.
 Wed Pepp (village elder), 120.
 Wedo doctrine, 15.
 Weightless, 74.
 Whiteness, 9-10; *magic*, 108; *see also* *Sap Cid*.
 Wolf, 75.
 Wolverine, 75.
 Woodworking, 38.
 Youth disadvantage, 50.
 Yrth, 109-112.
 Zewa Zab, 5, 34, 61-62, 71; *see also* *Gods*.
 Zo Do Wabda, 24-28, 54, 62.
 Zoxibek, 36, 110.
 Zuutak, 62; *see also* *Gods*.

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