

TEMPUS FUGIT

- A GUIDE TO HISTORICAL ROLEPLAYING -
(2001)

Paul Elliott

"You know, you and me have a lot in common, Kevin ... we like a risk ... we like adventure ... well this is it, Kevin. This is the Ultimate Adventure. None of your namby-pamby Time Holes to mess around with here ... This is the Big One!"
- Randall, Time Bandits

Welcome to **Tempus Fugit - The Guide to Historical Roleplaying**. I hope you enjoy this constructive analysis of historical roleplaying. First off, I'd better state a goal. I want to pass on tips and tricks from my own gaming experience, to offer ways of using historical sources for your gaming, and even present methods for reconstructing entire historical periods.

Second, I'd better state right now that I am NOT an expert in all facets of world history (who is?). I am a qualified archaeologist and ancient historian, but of course my interests and my biases necessarily fairly tightly focused. All historical periods fascinate me - but my expertise lies in only a few of them. If I make an historical error - forgive me. And if you notice then it means you're more of an expert than me. That's cool!

History can bring a huge amount to a roleplaying game or a setting. In this article I want to specifically talk about raiding history to enliven and enrich your current games and campaigns. I'll be talking about recreating historical settings, choosing or writing historical rules, and even fabricating alternate histories later on. For now I want to just illustrate some of the benefits a razzia into the history section of your local library might bring to your weekly gaming.

On the most fundamental level, GMs can lift out whole historical cultures and use them within a game (a process known as 'filing off the serial numbers'), but there are plenty more uses for history than that. I doubt there are few roleplaying games and settings out there today that haven't stolen ideas and concepts from some historical period or other. History is an obvious source of great inspiration. Why? Because there is so much of it. Because it is full of staggering stories, incredible characters, amazing settings, beauty, intrigue and horror. And because it is real. When you steal an idea from feudal Japan, from pre-Columbian Mexico, or from Georgian England, you are stealing something that actually existed - and transplanting that into your own game or setting not only adds an interesting twist, but also an element of authenticity.

One of the easiest and most common methods of raiding the history books is to browse through them looking for Props. A prop might be a special kind of building

(perhaps a villa with under-floor heating), it might be a weapon (perhaps an Indian katar or 'punching-knife'), it could be an artifact (such as the semi-mythical Celtic sacrificial bonfires called 'wicker-men'), or even a custom (perhaps the Roman festival of Saturnalia, where masters waited on slaves). These things are easily transported from their home era to your fantasy setting with a minimal amount of hassle, all you need is some rationale to explain their existence and Bingo!

Besides Props, the gold mines of history, may also be plundered for other shining nuggets, namely Plots, Characters, and Atmosphere. History is chock full with plots - not just the complex accounts of political machinations, but also social and personal accounts. These can make fantastically gameable adventure seeds. To illustrate the uses that a well-chosen historical plot can be put to, I'm going to use examples from science fiction.

Both the James Cameron movie 'Aliens' and the TV series 'Space: Above and Beyond' use historical military references within their narrative - each to a different extent. 'Aliens' very loosely runs with a plot that highlights a Vietnam-like reliance on high technology and overwhelming firepower against an unsophisticated but cunning and viscous enemy. This reliance and overconfidence proves fatal. Cameron's analogy is intentional, his previous script-work on the third Rambo movie meant that he did a lot of research into Vietnam - and he uses a lot of what he knows in 'Aliens'. In addition to the over-arching plot, Cameron also pulls out a number of atmospheric elements from the Vietnam War to push the analogy further. The military gear is well-used and graffitied, and the lingo is littered with US Marine-style phraseology.

'Space: Above and Beyond', meanwhile, steals story ideas from the United States' struggle against Japan during WW2. Rather than attempt to construct a plausible but wholly imaginary conflict set in interstellar space, the script-writers turned to the Pacific War for inspiration. To kick off the series there is a surprise attack on a human colony bringing humanity into a war, just as a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into WW2. Technologically, the enemy forces are roughly equal to our own. Individual pilots are based on huge space carriers that carry brave fighter crews into battle. And the conduct of the war, from episode to episode, is an epic push against the alien forces, hopping from planet to planet until the alien homeworld is in sight. One episode in particular virtually recreates the disastrous events on Guadalcanal during the Pacific campaign.

When I hold these stolen plots up as examples I'm not deriding them or accusing the script-writers of copping out. I think they are clever analogies given a unique twist by the writers concerned. Sometimes analogies can be nothing but blatant and very tedious rip-offs. A GM can take inspiration from history like this, but should try not to fall into the trap of copying plots too closely. Players aren't stupid, and may even begin to second guess the GM.

Usually less often targeted by history-thieves are Characters. To a GM historical personages can make great NPCs. Why? Well, they really existed giving a lot of credibility to a strong and colorful personality. 'Would someone really act like that? Yup!' The historical annals provide diligent GMs with a ready stable of interesting and exuberant NPCs ripe for transportation into almost any setting.

In 'Conan the Barbarian', the bad-guy of the movie is evil cult leader Thulsa Doom and his sinister cult of Set. The character of Doom is lifted unpretentiously from the pages of Medieval history. He is the Old Man of the Mountains, Rashid al-Din Sinan, the real-life chief of the fanatical political and religious terrorist cult, known as the Assassins! Even the scene where Doom commands a cultist to leap from the cliff top is taken from an actual historical event when Count Henri of Champagne visited the Assassin grand-master at his citadel. "No Christian is as loyal to his master as my men are to me" said the charismatic Assassin leader. To prove his point he signaled to two of his men high on a battlement and they obediently threw themselves to their deaths!

As we've already seen with James Cameron's use of Vietnam-style weaponry and lingo in 'Aliens,' certain historical images or themes can easily be transported to other worlds and used to add atmosphere and emotional depth to a game's setting. The Commie-bashing of Paranoia is lifted with excellent effect from the McCarthyist Witch-hunts of the 1950s. The nodding horse-hair crests of Gloranthan warriors effortlessly evokes the spirit of Classical Greece. Aspects of the alien culture of the leonine-like Aslan in Traveller encourage comparisons with the samurai-society of ancient Japan.

Simply naming the NPCs and locations of Warhammer's 'the Empire' using German instantly provides a grim and Gothic feel. In the same way, the use of Latin throughout the Ars Magica rulebook automatically lends the setting quite a nice Medieval feel, even without pages and pages of setting material. To return to the example of science fiction, the costume designer for 'Star Wars,' John Mollo, purposely emulated the military fashions of WW2. Stormtroopers take their name from the German troopers (and carry cylindrical ammo cases too!!). The officers wear near perfect Nazi uniforms, complete with jack-boots and riding trousers. The Alliance, on the other hand, are depicted as US pilots, with baggy loose fitting clothing, much less regimentation - the feel was 'buddy-buddy' and informal, sort of getting on with the job and less adherence to uniform regs. And so historical style reinforced the role of these characters and groups, becoming a kind of visual shorthand. Most of these techniques are best used when it comes to creating your own world, your own campaigns, or your own scenarios. Established game designers do this, why shouldn't you?

When? Where? Why?

"The first, and one may say the most necessary, task for writers of any kind of history is to choose a noble subject and one pleasing to their readers"

- Dionysus of Halicarnassus

Historical roleplaying games have been around almost as long as the hobby has. Right at the beginning we had the richly detailed historical settings of feudal Japan to play in (Bushido), the strictly hierarchical world of Napoleonic sail (Privateers & Gentlemen), the Roaring Twenties as depicted in Call of Cthulhu and Gangbusters, and the Wild West of Boot Hill.

As the hobby progressed new historical vistas opened up, but some remained far more popular than others - and remain so today. Feudal Japan enjoyed countless

reincarnations and is currently the inspiration for Legend of the Five Rings. The Wild West is alive in the form of Deadlands. Call of Cthulhu remains the best-selling period RPG on the market. These eras are ripe for gaming and the fact has been recognized by designers. But I for one recognize that there are a hundred other equally game-able settings out there. And with a little rewarding work any one of them can be turned into a great RPG campaign. But why bother? Who needs the hassle? Why not create your own fantasy setting? Good questions. Using an historical era is a double-edged sword, really. On the plus side, you get a fully-detailed and consistent world to play with. You get access to all the game aids of historical research from costume designs to maps, floor-plans, royal houses, detailed chronologies, information about food and drink, illustrations of coins, ship deck-plans, weapon types, important personages, political scandals, revolutions, secret societies, wars, and spectacular events. It's a ready-made world waiting only for the player characters to step in and breathe life into it.

Of great importance to those who care - the world is logical and consistent. And for history fanatics like myself, there is a distinct thrill to be had at roleplaying within a well known historical era, interacting with famous people and institutions, visiting well known locations, or actually being present at a key historical event. Am I alone? I hope not! Of course, there is a negative side as well. First off, you have to do all of this research and that can be time consuming. The era can be very limiting in the types of scenarios it can offer you, or in the kinds of characters it allows. For players of GMs who require much more freedom of action or thought, most historical settings are way too restrictive. No horse-riding? No iron? No female adventurers? No flashlights? Pah! One way around this is the introduction of 'setting-appropriate' magic or high-technology, but that's something I want to explore at a later date!

If you're reading this article then I'm hoping you want to give straight history a chance - or are at least interested to see how it can be done ... Your first consideration is: what era? You want to try something different, right? Something not done in a published game before. I personally recommend that you have a look at those settings you're already familiar with. That familiarity will speed up your research significantly. Know about WW2? Then how about a game of French resistance fighters? If your tastes run to Arthurian legend then consider Dark Age Britain. Play to your strengths.

This basic fact has to be addressed: check out what's already available on the shelves. You can save a ton of research simply by picking up Pendragon or GURPS Camelot. Steve Jackson Games' GURPS line has become the essential stopping point for historical gamers since its worldbooks are authoritatively written, well-researched and comprehensive. Let's say, however, that your chosen era has no published equivalent. You fancy running a game set at the dawn of history - with Sumerian or Babylonian city-states competing for resources, god-kings like Gilgamesh or Hammurabi leading chariot attacks, life over-shadowed by the stepped ziggurats and their powerful priesthoods. You have images of Hollywood epics, casts of thousands, deserts, and lush irrigated gardens (like I said - play to your strengths ... this is something I know about!).

Now what? First off - don't be proud. Begin your research small and work up. Don't go ordering J.S. Cooper's 'Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions. Vol I: Presargonic Inscriptions' from Amazon.com, thinking that any research is good

research. As a GM you do not need to find out everything you can about your period, you need to find out as much as you need to run a game. Feel no compunction in turning to children's history books. These offer short but very broad accounts of your era, they take nothing for granted and are usually lavishly illustrated. A modern trend in British history teaching is to focus more on 'how people lived' than on following wars and dynastic politics. For roleplayers this is a good thing. You can also pick up a broad overview of Mesopotamian history from an encyclopedia (whether CD-ROM, on-line or printed).

Look for something that interests you. It might be an enigmatic character (such as King Hammurabi), it might be a place (the city of Ur), an event (the invasion of the chariot-riding Kassite tribes), or just a state of affairs (the rise of Assyria and the time of great empires). Keep a roving eye open for conflict of any sort, that essential gaming ingredient that will power along any historical campaign. Look for dynastic struggles, foreign invaders, religious disturbances, rivalries, jealousies, and rebellions. A time of peace without menace does not often make good gaming material...

You think the work's over now you've chosen your era - forget it! Now you must pick a start date, review the chronology, look for a good story arc, think of adventure seeds and generally poke around that setting till it bleeds! I like to brainstorm with a blank sheet of paper, trying to fill it with as many 'cool things' as possible. Try to focus in on a 10-20 year period and gut it, rip things out and stick them on your sheet with impunity. Famous people, battles, important dates, inventions, cool buildings, and so on. You may find something even more cooler just off your time frame, so push it around a bit like the lens of a microscope. Picking just the right time for an RPG setting is crucial because it gives something to thrill your players and buzz you too. I'm going to settle on 1180 - 1150 BC, a time of massive ancient empires squaring off against each other, while being over-run by hordes of mysterious tribesmen from the deep deserts, mountains, and the seas.

Now for every 'cool thing' on your sheet (hopefully you've got a bucket-load - I could count at least twenty on mine!) try to come up with an adventure seed for each one. Don't sweat too much if you can't. These seeds probably won't be that much use as the core of an adventure, but will help you hook them into your adventures when you're writing them. Let's say one of your 'cool things' about Babylonia in 1180 BC is the historical appearance of the first camels, ridden by a new savage desert tribe called the Aramaeans. Your adventure seed might be: characters must steal camels and trek deep into the desert to find the tribal centre of the Aramaeans, before the tribe can mass an attack that will wipe out the frontier defenses.

Next look at the chronology of your chosen time period. What's happening overall? How many different 'big stories' are underway that produce big historical events later on in your time frame (or even well beyond them?). Try to identify a few of these. In Babylonia circa 1150 BC the mountain-men from Elam take over Babylon and the Kassite dynasty in power crumbles. In Egypt at the same time the pharaoh has died, but his wife and courtiers are being prosecuted for trying to overthrow him. A century later-on the cult of Amun-Ra becomes so powerful that it creates a break-away Egyptian theocratic state. Elements of these 'big stories' can be woven

into the campaign as rumours, adventure seeds, side-shows or even the focus of an entire story-arc.

One of the story arcs I'd always intended to do in a Tudor roleplaying campaign was centered around the dissolution of the monasteries. What did the commission that toured the monasteries prior to the dissolution (the player characters!) actually find? This historical horror game would involve plenty of investigation and a face-to-face report given to the dreaded Vicar-General Thomas Cromwell, maybe even to King Henry VIII himself!

The focus of this ancient historical campaign may be for the player characters to discover that Elam is growing in power, that it has a secret network within Babylon, and that this network is undermining the Babylonian royal house ready for the surprise attack. Or the PCs could be involved in a long-running investigation into the plot to kill the pharaoh. In the light of history, then, these sub-plots and adventure seeds will prove quite prophetic and fitting. Why roleplay in a detailed historical setting if the historical process thunders by without carrying you along with it? Personally, I'd feel a bit cheated if that happened to me.

Find Me a System

"The goal of these rules is to make you understand the purpose of the game and the ethos of its world."

- Eric Goldberg on Paranoia

Before I get into the meat of this month's installment, it's clear from some of your posts that I need to define a few terms. 'Historical role-playing' is a very broad term that I've been bandying about quite a bit recently. Exactly what do I mean? And what constitutes a historical setting? In fact, does historical role-playing require a great deal of verisimilitude, or do impossible swashbuckling sword-fights in a fantasy Paris still constitute historical role-playing?

This column, *Tempus Fugit*, is primarily aimed at giving advice for gamers who want to use aspects of history in their games, to play in historical settings, or even create the 'perfect' historical role-playing game. Let me first define this term 'historical role-playing.' I would describe it as the use of a period and place that acts as the background for a role-playing game, a background that pulls many (and sometimes all) of its elements from a documented historical period.

To create some kind of historical role-playing game, two essential ingredients are required: a setting and a rules-system. Now there are a number of different types of historical settings with different degrees of relative historical accuracy. Likewise there are a number of different types of rules that the GM might find suitable. Yes, there are alternatives to an accurate set of role-playing rules... Let's review the options available for setting and then rules.

Not all historical settings are of the same 'purity.' We can easily identify three common types of historical setting: dead accurate, fast & loose, and alternate history. Using the well-known example of the Roman era, a dead accurate setting would try to create an accurate representation of a particular Roman date based on scholarly historical research. It would aim for lavish detail, hopefully missing out

nothing. A fast & loose setting might introduce elements of magic, it might let Nero reign ten more years, it might not care too much about changing legionary equipment to suit later periods.

Finally, an alternate history setting actively re-writes Roman history, perhaps having Alexander the Great conquer Rome in 300 BC or aliens from Alpha Centauri arrive in 180 AD and battle the legions with energy weapons and genetically-enhanced parasites (!). I believe Harry Turtledove has written an entire cycle of novels based on an alternate Roman history.

To put these approaches into context, GURPS Imperial Rome definitely promotes a realistic setting, while my own attempt at a Roman role-playing game, ZENOBIA, has most definitely got a fast & loose setting. The new historical game FVLMINATA that should be out shortly, will try to create an alternate history of Rome based on the discovery of gunpowder. Three different levels of realism, three different ways of using historical sources to create a believable and entertaining historical setting. All we need now, surely, is a good realistic set of rules that allow us to give an accurate simulation of the way the world worked back in the days of our chosen historical era. Well, not quite. As I write this I'm on a plane somewhere above the Aegean Sea. Different planes are designed to do different jobs, that's obvious. Sure, they all fly - get you from A to B - but each type has its own capabilities - the supersonic transport, the heavy-lift helicopter, the wide-bodied jet. So it is with role-playing games.

It is often pointed out by role-players that a good GM can utilize any RPG rules set to run almost any type of game. This is probably correct, but each rules-set has its own capabilities - the full-on action rules of Hong Kong Action Theatre!, the epic generational rules of Pendragon, the heroic monster-bashing magics of D&D, and so on. And with these strengths come the inevitable weaknesses. D&D struggles to emulate a 'realistic' fight, the Pendragon rules struggle equally valiantly to support a game in the magic-rich world of Glorantha or the Young Kingdoms. And it would be a clever and adventurous GM that could use HKAT! to run a game of conversation-intensive court-room drama. Later on I'll be running through the strengths and weaknesses of a few prospective games for my chosen historical setting.

Broadly speaking, we can identify three common types of rules used to game in historical periods, and these rules types can actually be matched up with any of the setting types already reviewed, as desired. I see the common rules types as: realistic, heroic and narrative. Realistic rules give real-world results and often mimic the way things would actually have worked in a particular historical period. GURPS is perhaps the most famous realistic rules set on the market. Heroic rules, on the other hand, look on the player-characters' actions and role in the game with favor. They can be capable of some pretty unrealistic actions, but this all adds to the excitement. D&D is perhaps the most famous exponent of this type of rules system. Finally we have narrative rules. These abandon game mechanics that try to mirror 'real world' processes and instead focus on the dramatic roles of the characters, and also on the mechanics of drama. I would say that Theatrix is one of the most well known of the narrative systems.

Now if we look at a few historical-based games, we can see how rules-set and historical setting seem to be unrelated:

GURPS Aztecs	realistic setting, realistic rules
Space: 1889	alternate history setting, realistic rules
Pendragon	fast & loose setting, heroic rules
Call of Cthulhu	fast & loose setting, realistic rules
Castle Falkenstein	alternate history setting, narrative rules
Bushido	realistic setting, realistic rules
Privateers & Gentlemen	realistic setting, realistic rules

I'm hard-pressed to think of any realistic RPG that has been marketed with a narrative rules-set. In fact it seems to be de rigueur to publish realistic settings with realistic rules. So what am I talking about when I refer to 'historical' role-playing? Well, I do intend to look at alternate history settings separately at some point, so my main concerns in *Tempus Fugit* are both realistic and fast & loose settings. Rules-wise, since any rules type works with any historical setting, I won't be making any blanket assumptions about the type of rules being employed. Let's look at how these rule and setting considerations affect the choice of role-playing system you will have to make. As an example I'll continue to develop the idea of my bronze-age 'cast-of-thousands' setting mentioned in the previous installment. I want my players to feel the heat, to fear the pleased aristocracy in their chariots and villas. Death will come easily, from disease, from war, and from the lash of the overseer. In short, I want to take my players there and immerse them in a functioning environment. This establishes the type of game system I'm searching for as most definitely 'realistic'.

Although I've not explicitly stated so before, I want to make it historically accurate too. I'll incorporate a host of research ideas found in my books on Egyptology, I'll go to town on contemporary maps, non-player characters, royal families, culture, and technology. I want to tie the setting directly into my chosen period of 1180 - 1150 BC. This makes the setting a realistic one also. I could have pulled elements together from throughout Egyptian and Babylonian history to create a timeless setting - and this would have made it 'fast & loose.'

So you have a good idea of the era in which you want to game. You think you have a handle on the type of setting and on the type of rules you'll need. Now what? Plainly, you now need to look at the games you've got to hand or can get a hold of and see what will do the required job.

This epic bronze-age setting is going to require realistic rules. It needs a combat system that is pretty realistic in the way it works and in the damage it inflicts. It needs a player character generation system that will produce protagonists of low, moderate and upper moderate power who also have a realistic spread of skills/traits. I don't need rules for heroes or super-heroes. Other settings with realistic rules might benefit from the strengths of very specific rules-systems. A World War Two commando game, for example, would benefit greatly from the inclusion of vehicle to vehicle combat rules in whichever system was chosen. Likewise, a 17th Century Age of Sail game would obviously benefit from a good set

of sailing and man o' war rules. These things color your choices along with things like realism, appropriate character creation, suitable technology level, and that all-important, but very intangible, 'feel' of a prospective system.

I reach for my shelves and pull off a number of games I think might just cut the mustard as far as a bronze-age 'dawn of history' game goes. The games short-listed are: Hero Wars, RuneQuest, D&D, Everway, Warhammer, and GURPS. I own all of these games which means I can comment on them with a modicum of authority, and they are all fantasy games - hopefully making my job easier. I'll go through the games one-by-one, illustrating the various criteria I need to weigh to reach a decision.

Hero Wars - Wanting to emulate a world of religious cults I thought this game would be ideal. It's even set in its own version of our bronze age. But the title says it all, the focus is tightly (and quite rightly) centred on heroes and their rise to super-herodom and the rules are clearly aiming for a narrative, story-led approach. Potential: 2 out of 5.

RuneQuest - I have a choice here between gritty second edition and slightly sleeker third edition. This looks good. A deadly and realistic combat system, everyday characters and skill ranges, a system of cults and religions, a bias towards pre-medieval technology and mindset and a game that actually boasts in the introduction about how well the system can be adapted to other worlds (yes, even RuneQuest second edition has this boast!). Potential as a bronze age rules-set: 5 out of 5.

Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition - The world-beating fantasy system has got to be considered, but straight away the problems of conversion to a realistic bronze-age setting seem insurmountable. The tightly-ordered character creation system would need to be virtually gutted of races and classes. Beyond 3rd or 4th level characters exceed the bounds of realism - herodom comes quickly. And with it tons of supra-normal and magic-like abilities, magical spells, and items. Throw it all out, all of it. Frankly there won't be much left after this butchery except the basic attributes and the D20 mechanic. It could be done I don't deny, but the knifework (and the stitching to close the wound) might take forever. Potential for my historical setting: 1 out of 5.

Everway - This dream-like diceless roleplaying game has a distinctly ancient feel to it. Character creation is pretty free-form and personality based, but that's OK. Combat is angled toward story-telling just like task resolution as a whole, and the game employs a very distinctive tarot-card resolution method. Since there's minimal setting there's minimal conversion required. Can I live with such a free-form approach? How will I get over the setting and its wealth of strong character concepts to my players without a more structured character generation system? Potential: 2 out of 5.

Warhammer - For realism and gritty combat you can't beat Warhammer. Fights are ugly and bloody. Right away, however, I run into a problem. The rich setting melds seamlessly into the character creation rules, making it difficult to disentangle the two. It is based around a fascinating list of detailed 16th Century-style occupations, a list that would need to be extensively re-written before epic bronze age characters could spring forth. A quick glance down the list emphasizes this:

Squire, Artillerist, Gunner, Smuggler, Rat Catcher, Hypnotist, Grave Robber, and so on. Conversion to my historical period could be done, and Warhammer has the required level of gritty realism, but how much work would that involve? Potential: 3 out of 5.

GURPS - Steve Jackson Games' famous Generic Universal Role-Playing System is well known for its gritty and realistic rules, for the ease with which these generic rules can be implemented with almost any setting, for the way in which highly original and well-defined characters can be created and for the mass of historical worldbooks that accompany it. It seems like a great contender. There's even a GURPS Egypt worldbook available! Are there any points against using GURPS? Personally, I don't like the combat rules too much since they seem to involve lots of variables and modifiers (such as having knife damage vary depending on whether you cut or impale, on your strength and on the defender's armour). Nothing seems simple enough to fit with my lazy, corner-cutting method of gameplay. I find the fact that some weapons take one or even two rounds to 'ready,' that armour is rated according to two separate values, and that rounds are only a second long very frustrating. To me this is ultra-realism. More detail than I care to deal with. Some GMs have a ball with GURPS and run it quickly and seamlessly - I always get bogged down in modifiers. Ha well. Potential for my setting: 4 out of 5. So it looks like RuneQuest has just pulled ahead of GURPS and would be a great rules system with which to run my bronze age 'dawn of civilization' setting. Of course changes will be needed, modifications made and new rules written - but that's a different story ...

Cthulhu Ate My Hometown

When I first picked up my copy of R.Talsorian's 'Cyberpunk' back in 1989 my eyes alighted on one passage in particular, giving advice on atmospheric refereeing. It said:

"[Night City] should be a place that the Referee has an immediate grasp of, allowing him to give his descriptions the proper 'you are there' ambiance. Night City plays best when you use a city that the players are somewhat familiar with ..."

This certainly struck a chord with me and I set my first campaign in the Welsh capital city, Cardiff. It was where I was at university, and every one of the players had as much experience of the city as I had. We knew our way around, knew all the famous buildings, the clubs, the shopping centers, the docks - it seemed a great idea. And it worked. I needed to do a bit of work to transform innocent Cardiff into a cyberpunk den of violence and iniquity, but luckily I happened to stumble upon a supplement for GURPS Autoduel called The AADA Road Atlas and Survival Guide, Volume Five: The Midwest. It described the apocalyptic future of the US Midwest in detail, and included a nice chapter on 'fortress towns' and the techniques a GM can use to convert a 1980's city into a 21st century hell-hole.

With that as my guide I turned peaceable Cardiff into the British government's stronghold against Welsh seperatists. Welsh terrorism was running rife, the Welsh Office (home to the Secretary of State for Wales) in Cardiff was a fortress, and big business was becoming more security conscious. The big oil companies moved their headquarters there to oversee the oil industry at Milford Haven some miles down the coast, and they began their interminable corporate wars. I played up various

city districts, most especially Riverside, home to the Chinese community, and mapped out the city with its barricades, gangs, no-go zones, razor-wire fences and corporate developments.

Our collective memories of these early games are vivid. We used to walk the streets the day after some kick-ass mission and could not help point out places where the action had occurred. This alleyway here, the crane on that construction site. This plate glass window here ... and so on. Perhaps we were getting carried away, but the city seemed to develop two lives, the normal mundane life of students and shoppers, and the night-time world of armored buses, street gangs and software heists. You don't have to be a genius to see where I'm headed with this one, do you? It was some years later when I came up with the idea of reversing the concept. I had a Call of Cthulhu scenario ready to play that was (by default) set in 1920's USA, but the words that I'd read in Cyberpunk were still imprinted on my brain. I thought of setting this scenario in the town in which I now lived, and moving the scenario date even further back to 1910 - into the Edwardian period. Why?

The greatest benefit in setting a roleplaying game in your hometown during some historical period has got to be familiarity. Your players have walked the streets, they have seen the buildings and gazed across the parks, they might have used the railway station and stepped inside the churches. Of course a great deal will have changed and this technique would only provide any benefit if the historical town has some survivals into the modern-day. As such this isn't a method that every roleplayer will be able to use.

For those GMs and players who don't happen to live in a town or city with a century or two of history behind it (and I think a lot of American and Australian gamers will come into this category) you might want to try looking instead at urban myths or more general regional aspects of history. OK, so your suburb was built in the 1960s, but what happened in the area *before* that. Territory disputes, Civil War battles, Native American tribal lands, memorable colonization incidents ... there may not be any visible historical scars remaining, but that shouldn't let that stop an enterprising GM from using them in some form or another. We all remember Poltergeist, right?!

The decades that separate us from the chosen period allow for some fictionalisation of that setting. Certain aspects can be altered, important (but fictional) NPCs can be introduced, and the players won't know. But what they do know will help them believe that the gameworld is a real one. If you live in New Orleans, you will know what the weather is like, the effects of hurricanes and their likelihood. If I remember correctly a causeway connects New Orleans to the mainland, and knowledge of this may have tremendous implications during a roleplaying game. The setting becomes immediate and intimate. You feel as if you are there, despite being separated by many decades of history.

Why not use your hometown in a modern-day (rather than historical) setting? This is certainly an option, and I'm sure that plenty of super-hero roleplaying games have advised referees to do just that. Everything I've just touched upon applies in equal measure to a modern-day setting.

But remember that there is a requirement to fictionalise the setting to some degree. NPCs need generating, evil plots, horrors, paranormal events and other

roleplaying weirdness will rear their head eventually. Sometimes the sheer urbanity of your hometown makes these inclusions preposterous. Setting the same scenario in the future or the past sheds some of that mundanity, but retains that all important ambiance. As an example, my hometown is a decidedly mundane place to live and as a modern-day horror setting the very idea makes my players laugh. But when you push that horror back 50 or 100 years it becomes less of a joke and much more of an atmospheric opportunity, one that allows you to loot the gaming potential of that historical setting.

Rather than continue to list the advantages of using a town you're familiar with, I may as well go into a little more detail. I'll lay out the approach I used with my own town, taking it back in time from 2001 to 1910 ready for a Call of Cthulhu campaign.

I live in Bridlington, an English seaside town in East Yorkshire with a declining tourist industry. Geographically it lies north of the port of Hull and an hour's drive east of York. It sits in an attractive sandy bay and the northern sweep of this bay is actually a promontory of white chalk cliffs called Flamborough Head. Hundreds of ships have been wrecked on the cliffs resulting in the construction of a lighthouse on the promontory.

The town's heyday was in the early 20th century, the Edwardian period to be more precise. A railway station was built in 1903 and through it came both working-class and middle class holiday-makers up from the cities. Hotels and guest houses grew in number, a long promenade was built behind the beach and it featured landscaped gardens, pavilions and shows for the Edwardian public. Boat trips from the harbour were also popular.

There are two major types of information you are looking for when you research your hometown's history. The first type is 'hard' information that can be used to construct scenarios and establish the building blocks of your campaign. The second type of information is 'soft,' providing atmosphere and ambiance to flavor the game and suffuse it with reality and historicity. Both are necessary to a greater or lesser degree.

When I started discovering 'hard' information about Bridlington's past I soon started to collect a long list of useful data. To work out what I had I needed to separate all of the facts into four major lists: Events, NPCs, Places, and Maps. I'll give you a few examples of the kinds of information I was digging up:

The Great Gale - On a stormy day in 1871 dozens of ships were sheltering in the bay and thirty of these were wrecked on the beaches with the townsfolk turning out to watch the horrific spectacle, unable to help. Seventy people (including six lifeboatmen) were drowned.

Kit Brown - Christopher (Kit) Brown was Bridlington's most famous fisherman and a folk hero. He was a pillar of the community and both he and his son were lifeboatmen, both earned medals for their bravery. Kit died during a sea rescue against the sea-wall in 1891 and was given a naval funeral.

Beacon Hill - There's plenty of flint in the chalk cliffs of the headland and bronze age settlers exploited this resource. A high hill on the headland known as Beacon Hill was dug out for sand in the 1800s and workmen found the remains of a Bronze

Age farm. Some think the Romans later built a signal station on the hill to warn of Saxon raiders.

Saint John - An Augustinian priory (monastery) was founded in 1113 by the lord of the manor, Sir Walter de Gant. Its power and prestige accelerated following the rule of Prior John de Thweng who was reputed to work miracles (including walking out to sea to rescue storm-tossed sailors, turning water to wine and raising the dead). He died in 1379 and the miracles continued, leading the pope to canonise John in 1401. His shrine attracted many pilgrims. The priory became the focus of Bridlington and the reason for its growth.

Kings - King Henry IV visited the priory in 1407 and Henry V made a pilgrimage in 1421. Henry VI even carried around with him a relic of St John - one of the saint's fingers!

The Marshall Family - An established family of merchant ship-owners from 1700 onwards into the 1800s. Very successful, most sons became master mariners and traded heavily in timber, corn and coal. Church-goers and community-leaders.

Danes Dyke - A deep wooded gully splits the chalk cliffs, and it was once reinforced as a defense by early man. The builders created a huge earth-defense that cut off the entire peninsula. It wasn't the Danes (Vikings), but it might have been Celts or more plausibly Saxons. In fact some think the Saxon king Ida landed on Flamborough Head and used it as a base camp before moving north to found the kingdom of Bernicia.

Privateers Attack - Bridlington had a small fort near the harbor with a few cannon, and these were used to ward off three Dutch privateers in 1666 while the raiders drove two merchantmen onto the shore, torched a third and fired on the town. When they tried to land the locals fought the privateers off. A few weeks later several boatloads of Dutch privateers tried to land and were again beaten off.

Lighthouse - The lighthouse was built in 1806 to prevent ships from being wrecked on the headland. It replaced an old octagonal beacon built in 1674. Strangely this beacon may not have actually seen any use, and equally strangely it was erected a mile inland.

Flamborough Village - This village sits out in the middle of the headland, remote and obscure, a fishing community since early Medieval days. So undiluted is the Viking blood here that it is sometimes referred to as 'Little Denmark'. The fishermen still go to sea in 'cobbles', little open-topped clinker-built boats built in the Viking fashion. Boats were kept at two rocky coves that allow access from the cliff top to the shingle shore: North Landing (on the northern side of the headland) and South Landing (on the southern). St.Oswald is the patron saint of fishermen, and the weather-vane on top of St.Oswald Church is bronze fish.

Battle of Flamborough Head - In 1779 (during the War of Independence) a ferocious sea battle took place between American ships and the Royal Navy. Admiral John Paul Jones boarded a British ship as his own vessel, the Serapis, sank. The battle occurred just north of the headland.

These pieces of information would become the central building blocks of my 'Call of Cthulhu' campaign. I could divide them into three lists:

NPCs: Kit Brown, St.John, The Marshall Family and Kings.

Places: Beacon Hill, Danes Dyke, Lighthouse and Flamborough Village.

Events: the Great Gale, Privateers and the Battle of Flamborough Head.

As you carry out more research and find other interesting things that might prove more useful, stick them into one of those categories. This makes life easier, you

create for yourself a ready store of campaign plot devices. Maps, incidentally, should always be obtained if possible. I was able to get hold of a modern map of the area, a map of Edwardian Bridlington, and a sketch-map of Danes Dyke. Together these form a fourth group of campaign resources.

'Soft' information doesn't help you to write historical scenarios or plan out a period campaign, but it does allow you to portray your setting accurately and vividly. If you've gone to the trouble of planning and writing a historical scenario, you at least want it to feel historical when you and your players begin gaming. What kind of information is 'soft?' There are innumerable types of atmospheric data you can collect.

I managed to purchase a local history book on Bridlington that includes lots of 'trivial' pieces of information such as the date of the first cinema, the names of hotels and their prices, the names of pleasure steamers in the harbor, the name of the Edwardian hospital, some of the local pubs, etc. From the same bookstall I bought a book called 'Old Bridlington' full of period photographs showing fashions, activities, old buildings, street scenes, shops, shots of the promenade and so on.

These two purchases provided more than enough detail for me. You have to keep your eyes open for useful 'soft' resources. Postcards, old catalogues, museums, libraries, tours, guidebooks, old newspapers, recreations - even statues or memorials. Of course if you can walk around those areas of the town that have changed the least, and go look at or go inside buildings that existed in your chosen era, then so much the better! All of these things give you (the GM) meat to feed to your players.

It only took me a few weeks to collect together all of my 'hard' and 'soft' information; the time had come to use this raw data in planning my Edwardian Cthulhu campaign. Straight-away I envisaged an Agatha Christie-style campaign premise, with Edwardian Bridlington attracting holidaymakers both rich and poor, with the wealthier clientele residing here all summer. As they took in the bracing sea air, took a dip in the ocean from the back of a new-fangled 'bathing machine' and watched concerts in the sea-front pavilions they gossiped and intrigued. They may have connections, interests and dirty linen from across the Empire. Here such baggage might serve as a wonderful plot generator on its own. All I had to do was look for local Mythos elements to weave into this premise to create a setting with some depth.

So I checked over my resource list and eyeballed a number of possibilities. That mysterious 17th century beacon tower? Could that have been built for a local wizard as a means to summon Yog Sothoth? And being so isolated and oriented toward the sea, surely Flamborough must be a haven for deep ones. The fact that the coves and bays along the cliffs are riddled with smuggler's caves only adds weight to this theory. They might allow reclusive and partially transformed Flamborians access to the sea and their fishy brethren.

What about Danes Dyke, that prehistoric earth-defense cutting off the peninsula? Perhaps it was actually built and defended in ages past to keep something in (such as deep ones or worse...). Now that's a creepy thought. Beacon Hill may have been the site of a Roman signal station (others have been excavated along the coastline) but no evidence has so far been unearthed. Such a discovery would make a great

scenario - especially if it then emerges that deep ones wiped out the garrison there, not Saxon raiders.

So much for the available locations around Bridlington, but what about the NPCs? I can envisage the famous lifeboatman, fisherman and folk hero Kit Brown bequeathing some ominous legacy to his perplexed son. Something dredged up in his fishing nets and kept locked away in a sailor's chest, or a chilling diary that recounts some hideous encounter off the headland. The Marshalls are easily woven into this tapestry as the major ship-owners and merchants. With numerous business contacts and interests, any brush with the Mythos may have them hiring investigators and asking questions. Meanwhile, St. John could be a wonderful repository of Mythos legends and accounts; how did he come by his powers? What became of his preserved finger? What miraculous artifacts, books or treasures of John lay buried under the Priory churchyard?

Of the three events I have in my list, the Great Gale strikes me as the most fascinating. To weave that event into an Edwardian campaign would certainly add real-life tragedy, horror and gloom to the story. Could the Gale have been caused by evil magics or the wrath of some Mythos beastie? Perhaps an important treasure from some distant land was recovered from the wreckage strewn beach the next day. Turning to the Battle of Flamborough Head, I have visions of some ghoulish seaweed-draped crewmen rising up from the British wrecks - or have I watched 'The Fog' too many times? Otherwise an Edwardian expedition may set out to recover artifacts from the Serapis. Or it may use that event as a cover, and be testing one of the new diving suits for some other, more macabre purpose... Don't think that talk of Cthulhu and horror roleplaying has little to do with historical gaming. 'Call of Cthulhu' seems well suited, and a friend of mine has run a very successful and well researched Elizabethan campaign set in his home locale of South London. But if you want to play it straight then all of this advice applies equally. I've used 'Call of Cthulhu' here as an example because the Edwardian campaign I've described is my most detailed foray into exploiting the history of one of the places I've lived. I was lucky enough to live in Canterbury a few years ago, and with its intact street layout and the fact that many buildings still standing in the city are over two-hundred years old, the place proved a superb springboard for historical roleplaying. I suppose it all comes down to where you live, where you've lived and what you're familiar with.

Cut 'N Paste - D20 Romans

Deciding to use the Adventure! RPG as the basis for a historical French Resistance game is the easy part. Deciding to use the Dungeons & Dragons rules for your game of Celtic heroes fighting a guerrilla war against invading Romans is also the easy part. Way back in August I decided to use an old copy of RuneQuest (2nd edition) as my system of choice to run a Biblical-style epic game of bronze age empires. There would be chariots and galleys, pyramids and slaves, fiendishly trapped tombs and hierarchies of priesthoods. Like I said - that was the easy part. The hard part is adapting that published RPG to your chosen historical setting. OK, sometimes it's blissfully easy (using Feng Shui to run a 1930s Shanghai campaign, or TSR's old Gangbusters system to run a 1970s Mafia game set in New York...). But more often than not, you've got some work to do.

Now, I'm fully aware that the second edition of RuneQuest went out of print many, many years ago, and as far as I know, the third (and last) edition of the game is also out of print. So using RuneQuest as my example of how to adapt an RPG to a historical setting seems a little short-sighted. Instead I want to use a game that most of us are familiar with in one way or another: Dungeons & Dragons (3rd edition). By using this widely available game you can see how much I adhere to, or diverge from, the original rules-set.

Unfortunately (see my article 'Find Me A System!') I considered D&D a bad match for my bronze-age setting. No problem! I'll show you how I adapted D&D3E earlier this year to run a 'fast and loose' historical game set in the late Roman Empire. I've used this setting before, of course, in my rules-lite game ZENOBIA, but I was scoping around for a solid rules-set that might carry the setting and let me experiment with the new edition of Dungeons & Dragons. For one thing, I'd already done the research!

This Late Roman Empire setting of mine uses history as a firm base, but is adapted to provide cool plot hooks and opportunities for magic and monsters. It is period of imperial excess as well as spectacular decline, civil war, plague, inflation, barbarian incursions into the heart of the Empire, decay and corruption. It is 'Cyberpunk 260 AD'. Obviously the greatest benefit of using a Roman setting is that daily life, government and all the trappings of Rome are fairly well known to players even before play begins.

We're going to create a 'magically rich' Classical game world, full of Romans and Greeks, Olympian gods and legionnaires. To stamp some individuality onto the setting I've turned to the eastern Roman Empire, adding a bit of exoticism and a touch of the unfamiliar that might make the transition from straight history to 'fast and loose' a little smoother.

My philosophy of historical adaptation is to settle on a suitable set of rules that come close to emulating the feel of my chosen era. From there I begin to 'cut and paste', tailoring the rules by making cuts where necessary, as well as additions and alterations. My over-riding concern is to change as little as possible, which makes it easier on the players, and easier for myself (let's face it, my time is best used in creating scenarios, plot complications and dynamic NPCs). For D&D, the alterations can be broadly divided into two groups: character generation, and then combat and other mechanics.

Before we start, please note that I'm not pro- or anti- D&D3E, to me it's just another game system waiting to be picked up and used. D&D3E has its strengths (just like most systems on the market), and common sense tells me to exploit those strengths. There is no sense in choosing D&D and gutting it of the essential elements that make up that RPG's strong points. Always play to a game's strengths.

What do we need to change, add and subtract from the D&D rules before my players can create Roman characters? Let's look at the bare bones of the character creation system: a set of undemanding characteristics, a number of non-human races and a spread of interesting character classes. First off, the characteristics don't pose a problem; Strength, Wisdom, and Intelligence work just as well in 260 AD as in the Forgotten Realms.

The races, however, have got to go. I'm after a 'fast & loose' Roman game, not an alternate history setting. Humans only. What about the character classes? Is there any room in a Roman game for such Medieval occupations as Bard, Paladin, Ranger, Sorcerer and Wizard? And surely we can forget that Oriental misfit - the Monk?! I'm determined to throw out as little as possible, but still retain a strong and colourful historical connection, so its time to do some lateral thinking. First I decide to associate each character class with a brotherhood, organization, cult or college. This will prevent players from taking an unsuitable class and turning it something totally 'way out'. When players take a class they take up the trappings and roles of the Roman organization that goes with it. Of course plugging the player characters into the Roman world from day one is a nice side-effect!

Next comes the hard task of finding suitable versions of the Medieval classes. I put out of my head all previous assumptions about each class and look at the powers and bonuses that a class comes with. I looked at the basic building blocks of each class, what they could do. Were Rangers restricted to operating in forests? Were Monks tied inextricably to the Orient? Did Paladins have to act like and look like Sir Galahad? I look for the restrictions on each class; as I run a Roman concept through what a class can do and what it can't, I get an idea of its suitability. For several days I bash my head against several large research books to come up with the following character class correspondencies:

Barbarian - We're all familiar with the Germanic barbarian archetype, blonde and bearded charging out of the northern forests. But in the deserts of the East? Surely a member of one of the tough Arab tribes, camel riding raiders on the fringe of society. Players select from the Thamud, Azad, Tanukh, Judham and outcast Jackals.

Bard - Magical musicians... didn't the Greek god Orpheus have a mystery cult associated with him? Bards could be members of this cult, seeking mystical enlightenment through the practice of music (lyre playing, essentially).

Cleric - A priest is a priest. I see no good reason to change the role of the cleric, except to make every Cleric affiliated with a Temple (to Venus, to Jupiter, to Marduk, etc.).

Druid - Now Druids have got to be genre specific, we're talking Celtic oak-priests here aren't we? Well, I checked the PHB and to be honest there's nothing there that says Druids are tied to forests. They use a lot of vegetation-based magic, but that is the only real restriction I have to contend with. In the desert the main source of vegetation is around the oases. I might make Druids priests of the oasis god Dushara, worshipped in the Arabian wilderness. Away from society these priests will be very different from their city-dwelling brothers, and have much in common with the Arab camel-riders. In fact my 'Druids' will probably be members of these Arab tribes.

Fighter - Probably the easiest correlation of them all! Fighters get to choose their patron organization; either an Eastern legion of the Roman Empire, a Mercenary Company or a Gladiatorial School. Character level might roughly equate to rank and responsibility within the force.

Monk - Ahh. The ascetic martial arts expert. I'm determined to use every character class if I can. Let me see ... unarmed combat, personal prowess and achievement ... how about those Olympic athletes? The Olympic Games continued throughout the Roman era and we can postulate a dedicated band of professional athletes competing there every four years and also in the plethora of other games around the Classical world. Their aim is to achieve physical perfection and glory. These

Olympians train hard and seek out physical challenges. They are boxers, wrestlers, runners and discus throwers. They are a sacred brotherhood initiated into the Olympic cult, superb athletes and winners of laurel crowns.

Paladin - Ouch! It's hard to dispel the image of a chivalric knight dressed in flamboyant Late Middle Ages armour riding a war-horse and seeking out evil monsters, dragons and other abominations for the sake of the Church. But we have to. Looking at the rules the paladin fights for law and morality, and can wield holy magics. Are there paladins in the Roman Empire? Well there might be in my Roman Empire! How about members of that splendid mystery cult that bears my name: Mithras? A tough god of light, truth, goodness and brotherhood, a god of legionnaires, contracts and hope. The Paladin might easily represent a member of this cult, either a legionnaire or a senator, a merchant or a lawyer, trained by his god to fight, to seek out evil and deception. Mithras was a light-bringer, a crusader who fought for life and truth. It also used a strict hierarchy which we can model using the class levels of the Paladin.

Ranger - Modelled on Aragorn, I'm sure. But not out here in the deserts of Syria and Arabia. Transported to this inhospitable wilderness it's not hard to come up with a Roman equivalent: the Ranger can be a desert scout, an intrepid sand-walker leading caravans and army units from waterhole to waterhole. I'm not sure about a suitable organization for these. They may be attached to Merchant Houses or Legions, or they might instead be members of ancient desert families, living close to the desert.

Rogue - The Rogues are easy, too! Every Rogue is a member of a city-based underworld brotherhood. Every big city has one, Antioch, Thebes, Seleucia ... Rome has several (nicknamed 'sicari' or 'knife-men'). They are knife-wielding mafiosi involved in all aspects of crime. Again, the class structure of the Rogue can mirror progression up into the higher levels of such an organization.

Sorcerer - I was sure that I had no room for this class. Surely the Wizard can fulfill all of the duties of the Sorcerer. I still wanted to include all of the classes, though. Blood-line is mentioned in the class description which suggests to me a blood-link to the gods. These characters could have divine powers through their link to the Immortals. More than that I think that the Sorcerers could stand in as Classical witches like the Sibyl, Medea, the witches of Thessaly and of Endor. They aren't scholars, they inherited their magical skills from their mothers (or fathers..).

Wizard - Magic existed in 3rd century Rome, there is a vast amount of evidence for spells, curses, magical scrolls and ceremonies. However, I need to make a distinction between Sorcerers and Wizards and the way I am going to do that is by portraying Sorcerers as uneducated self-taught witches, and Wizards as highly educated proto-scientists. The Wizards of 260 AD will be the philosophers, men who tried to understand the nature of the universe, its elements and fabric, who carried out experiments, invented wondrous machines and formulae. In our Rome, the philosophers achieved the impossible - they were able to understand and manipulate the forces of the universe. I assign a school of philosophy (Neo-Platonic, Stoic, Cynic, etc.) to each magical college.

I think I've done a fair job of aligning the D&D rules with the Late Roman setting so far. Rather than stripping the game down to fit my setting perfectly, I've wrapped my setting around the game, and tweaked the setting to fit, rather than tweaking the rules. I'm trying to make life easy for myself ...

When in Rome, Adapt

In the last chapter, I began to adapt a set of roleplaying rules to fit a particular historical setting. My era of choice was the later Roman Empire (circa 260 AD), my game of choice was D&D3E. Hopefully you've got your own ideas. You might want to use Big Eyes Small Mouth to run a Wild Wild West campaign, or Pendragon to run a game of Water Margin-style Chinese overlords. Maybe it's as simple as writing up a set of clichés for a game of RISUS Victorians... Whatever the specifics of your intended game, I hope that my discussion here offers some useful advice.

In 'Cut & Paste: D20 Romans' I had space only to examine how the D&D character creation rules fitted my setting. As it happened, they fitted rather well! But bear in mind that I chose the game to exploit a number of its strengths. One of these was the class system, another was its 'over-the-top' use of magic, and yet another was D&D's encyclopedic store of monsters, spells, treasures, and magic items. I'm after a 'fast-and-loose' version of the late Roman Empire, where magic and monsters exist, but where the historical realities of life (and death) of this era are never far away.

I want a fantasy world that is fresh and non-Medieval, but that is familiar enough to me that I make it seem real and can draw upon historical sources to imbue it with historical flavor. I'm not seeking gritty realism, but a veneer of savage reality keeping the heroes within acceptable human limits.

But game lethality is not the burning issue. What is? The checklist. You need a checklist. A checklist that will answer the question: 'what do I need to address within my chosen game system to infuse it with setting detail?'. In other words how can I make plain old vanilla flavored D&D taste like the Near East in the 3rd century? Taking away the trees and replacing them with deserts won't work. Not on its own, anyway.

The best way to convert your rules is to conduct a quick read-through of the book. Keep a notebook handy. Character creation will come first and take up a lot of your time, as last month's article already explained. Watch out for anything that might not fit your historical setting. As I flip through the D&D3E Player's Handbook I note Table 3-7 Deities needs to be re-written with Apollo, Jupiter, and a number of other popular 3rd century gods in mind. I add it to my checklist. Again, at Table 4-6 Languages I come across another list that can be adapted historically. I almost skip over Alignment (never really using it in my older games), but a thought strikes me and I make a note on the list to use the rules to provide typical alignments for the cultures in my Roman universe. I'm looking to use anything in the rulebook that allows me to meld setting detail and rules!

I consider changing the starting heights for Romans, then drop the idea as a waste of time. You might not. Humans as a race have never been taller, and you may want to reflect this fact in a historical rules-set. You may be able to get a cultural average and apply that figure to the game under conversion.

Coinage is added to the checklist next. Gold and silver pieces will be easily adapted to the gold aureus and silver denarius. And I'll make the gold coins pretty rare - I want silver to dominate. A rate of exchange will be easily to lift from the textbooks. Next up is weaponry and equipment. This won't be a hard job, just a matter of

noting down which weapons have to go (like the crossbow, rapier, glaive, warhammer, etc.), altering any details of remaining weaponry (weights, cost etc.) and maybe adding one or two unique 3rd century Roman weapons to the table. I'll make a note to do the same with armor. In fact, I note straight away that the armor names are inappropriate, as are the descriptions. It looks like I will have to write up a separate paragraph for each one. I'd like to retain the armor statistics on Table 7-5, but it looks likely that I might have to come up with my numbers as well. I get the feeling armor has been 'de-emphasized' in 3E and I want armor in my setting. Perhaps I can use the armor table re-write as an opportunity to redress this imbalance...

There may be much or there may be nothing to change in your game's combat section, depending on how the combat mechanics reflect your intended campaign style. Realistic rules will emphasize quick kills, blood loss and death, a swashbuckling 17th century game will not. I've spent some time already preparing a list of elements in the D&D3E combat section that need modifying. I want a grittier, nastier-looking type of combat in my historical game. This isn't the place for me to explain the proposals. I make a note on my checklist. Likewise Magic. I chose D&D3E because it offered such over-the-top classical fantasy magics in abundance, and I want a Roman fantasy! So I intend to alter magic little, if at all. I make a note to change the way in which wizards will recover their spell-casting ability, I want something more tied in with the setting. I don't care much for 'realism' here, more for setting flavor.

Since my wizards will be Philosophers, I might rule that 're-learning spells' will instead consist of carrying out mathematical calculations, figuring out all of the complex math problems that will crop up in the day to come. As a side note I make an addition to the list: schools of philosophy can be represented by the magical schools of specialization. New wizards must choose one, whether Stoic, Cynic, Neo-Platonist, Megaric etc.

The rest of the rules should not prove a problem. I note in the Dungeon Master's Guide the inclusion of NPC classes, and mention on my checklist that I need to equate certain professions in my Roman setting with some of these NPC classes. I make a note of the section on Guilds and Organizations on page 44. I must make up some of my own that will reflect the society of the time! These will provide great story hooks and can give me a way to tie player characters into the setting. Further on I come across the section on magic items and note with alarm that weapons and armor crop up again in some detail. This teaches me a lesson - cross referencing. Change one aspect of the rules and you must be very careful that you address all of its implications, or you are going to be caught out mid-game. So magic armor and weapons go onto the checklist.

All is not lost, however, as the extensive list of magical items can be used to link setting and rules. Many of the 'Wondrous Items' appear in the classical myths as the paraphernalia of the gods. In 3rd century Rome I have the opportunity to make the connection. So that winged boots become winged sandals of Mercury, the amulet of health can become an ankh of Ra, and so on. One-of-a-kind artifacts may even be the very items used by the gods.

Once the checklist is compiled, I'm satisfied that there are no nasty surprises hidden away anywhere. Everything should be cross-referenced. I put the jobs in

order and begin work, creating a custom set of notes, rules, and tables that I'll keep with the rules as play gets underway. If you intend to run the game for more than one session I urge you to write these customizations up rather than leave them as rough notes on scraps of paper. The idea of the checklist is that you can bring all of your historical modifications together, you are able to access them and use them as easily as the published rules.

Often it is a good idea to conform to the layout style of the game under conversion, writing up weapon descriptions in the same manner as the game, new encounter tables in the same style, and so on. It all makes your work easier to use. After you finish these jobs, the checklist then becomes a conversion log, listing changes to the game for future reference. As you purchase additional supplements you will need to go back to the checklist and add on any new modifications that require your attention. Then the day will eventually come when someone actually publishes 'D20 Romans' and you find you've done a much better job of it than they have!

Historical Props Part1

This month I enjoyed a Viking treat. York (England), my nearest city, hosts a Viking festival each year and has done so for over a decade. The place has strong connections with the Vikings and was once conquered by Erik Bloodaxe to become the heart of a Viking kingdom in northern England. Today, York boasts a fantastic (and historically accurate) Viking recreation based on the plentiful archaeological evidence under the city streets. It's called Jorvik and is world-renowned.

So I booked into a hotel with wife and son for a couple of days to watch the climax of the 'Jolablot' festival. Despite severe flooding the previous day, a scheduled Viking longboat race went ahead. Teams from Ireland, Denmark, France, and elsewhere competed in short races between two of York's bridges. Crowds on the quayside cheered them on and the replicas fared well against the swollen river. As the teams clambered in and out I got to have a good look at these boats - they were beautiful. The carved wooden prows, in particular, were exquisite.

Following the longship races a procession of Viking warriors through the city ended with a pitched battle with Saxons on the green below Clifford's Tower. The procession, the various challenges being made, and the ensuing battle were all part of a retelling of an actual historical episode. I'm sure that every Viking and Saxon re-enactment group in Britain got stuck in! In fact, wherever you went in York you saw Vikings chatting, drinking outside pubs, strolling through the crowds ... a surreal experience.

For the rest of the afternoon we toured the Jorvik centre and its museum, waiting for the closing ceremony of the festival. This was to be a floodlit story and battle, and open to ticket-holders only. It proved worthwhile. A feud between a Saxon thane and a Viking lord over the love of the thane's daughter escalated into full scale war. It ended after much (faked) bloodshed with a torch-lit procession of Viking widows searching for their husbands. The firework display that ended the night had been a big secret, and it was spectacular. It also sent a shiver down the spines of my wife and I.

We'd only just been discussing the grisly episode in York's Medieval history when the Jewish population, sheltering in Clifford's Tower from persecution, were all massacred when the tower was set alight. They were burnt alive. The fireworks

were coming from the empty shell of the tower and the bright glow, coupled with the billowing smoke vividly recreated something that we had talked about only an hour earlier.

What has my holiday got to do with roleplaying (besides the obvious historical connection)? The Jolablot festival kicked off a few ideas in my head, and inspired me to look at 'recreation' in the very specific table-top sense. Obviously the Viking re-enactors are full-on LARPer, but LARP isn't really my scene. I'm unqualified to talk about it.

But I do use props in my games; and I don't just mean shouting: 'this is the dagger you see sticking out of the king's back!' while waving a plastic toy commando knife at my cringing players. I want to share some of the historical prop ideas that I've used over the years with you. Use them, abuse them... come up with your own. I see three types of props that are eminently suitable for historical roleplaying games; 1) Things that players use and see, 2) Things that characters use and see and 3) Out of game props. In this article I'll be discussing the first type of prop. What do the players use, see, and pick up during a typical roleplaying session? Think about it ... maps, the GM's screen, the character sheet, dice, and not forgetting the entire character generation section in the rulebook. Everything the players look at, hold and read is an opportunity to convey elements of your game's historical setting. Not in an overt 'read this essay on Mayan archaeology' way, but in a very subtle, attractive, and unintimidating way.

Is there a point to it? Well, for most of us there is a finite limit to the amount of historical atmosphere that you can convey through speech alone. Even without resorting to period photos, essays, and other very overt props the GM can get a lot of period flavour for very little outlay by focusing on the player interface. Character sheets must surely be the greatest contact point for players with the game and they are easily customised or redesigned with your era in mind. Why stick to white paper? There are plenty of nifty paper styles out there, from marble effect (Rome anyone?) to papyrus (Egypt and the Near East), parchment (17th C), and so on. Effect papers cost more money, but consider how often that single piece of paper gets studied, looked at, modified, studied some more - sometimes for months on end!

The same goes for fonts. Obviously they have to be readable first-and-foremost, but the incredible choice of fonts out there on the web provides the GM with a font for every occasion. For example, I dug out evocative fonts for games I was running in 1930's San Francisco, the Wild West, 19thC Germany, the Bronze Age, Stone Age, Dark Age, Celtic Britain, Medieval Arabia, Victorian London, and the Elizabethan age. Using just a simple hand-written style font gets your character sheet away from the form-filling stereotype - none of this has to be historically accurate!

You could also compliment the paper style and font with some artwork. Use either black and white clip-art, or (if you have book illustrations you fancy using and you're not too technical, trace or photocopy the line-art that you need). Keep it small and simple, preferably some kind of logo or symbology in keeping with the setting; hieroglyphs, runes, heraldic badges, or a distinctive weapon or helmet from the period are all good ideas. GMs with a leaning towards graphic design are

probably already thinking of adding watermarks, creating faux documents from the period, and other advanced tricks.

Designing a fake document is difficult to pull off successfully, but it does have an inherent coolness about it! And of course it may not always be appropriate since these things are usually going to be fairly modern-era personnel files. The character sheet for a GURPS World War II game, for example, might emulate a GI personnel file. You might think that the personnel file approach means that you have to find an historical original to doctor, but not necessarily. Using a Courier font to emulate type-written script can do the trick, along with including a few useless boxes for 'official use' as well as a department header and perhaps a footer that gives the document's official designation and date of issue. A little historical license is required to create boxes for stats and advantages/disadvantages. Don't get too picky about this. Call them 'test scores' or 'aptitudes' or something. Advantages/disadvantages can be listed under 'psychological or physical evaluations' or something. It will all require some thought.

Dice. How can you get dice to fit the era? Most times you can't. Forget about it. But now and then, you have a chance to add a little detail here too. Running a Stone Age game? Then try a set of haematite dice (drool... I must get myself some of those one day).

For a campaign run in Stalin's Communist Russia you could use red dice sporting yellow numerals. I use a set of six-sided dice in Zenobia I swiped from a Roman boardgame called TABVLA and the numerals are all Roman: I to VI! You might think I'm grasping at straws here, but dice come in all kinds, you never know when colour or style will match the theme of your setting. Of all the suggestions here, altering dice type is probably the one to get least worked up about! But the option might occasionally arise.

Maps, of course, are a staple of table-top roleplaying games. RPG publishers have long recognized the opportunity to convey setting information via the medium of skillful cartography. Obviously you need not think about embellishing the GM's map since we're only interested in adding historical flavour to things the players get their grubby hands on. If the campaign or scenario requires a player's map then you might find it worthwhile to draw it out in a style fitting the setting. Again, you can purchase parchment-type paper and emulate a suitable font or writing style. If you're stuck for suitable mapping paper, then I have a great tip. Take a piece of normal white paper that's just the right size for your map and smear one side with a used tea-bag. Make sure you really stain the paper. When you've finished, screw the wet paper up and leave it to dry. Step two involves smoothing out your paper and lightly brushing it with cooking oil. Once that's dry, you're ready to start drawing. Depending on your paper, your ink and your oil you might have to experiment a little with this process to get the perfect sequence. Sometimes it looks best if you draw the ink map first before you stain, sometimes not. As with character sheets, you might want to add a nice symbol or illustration to your map. Keep it simple, out of the way and (hopefully) setting specific. A Roman map might have a Roman eagle or a legionary standard, an Arabian map might have crossed scimitars or a geometric design; and remember that on a map, colour is a must! I could carry on to the end of this article just explaining how you might go about designing a historical map. This isn't the place.

Suffice it to say that it pays to use language and terminology that springs from your era, rather than substitute modern-day usage. Stonehenge builders lived in (what is now) modern-day Wiltshire, once a part of Wessex, but neither name should feature on a Stone Age map. Neither would the River Avon. Inappropriate labels cut through the ages and break the spell. A little research will give you names used at the time. If you can't find any, or they don't exist, then extrapolate from later periods or neighbouring lands.

My last remark on maps concerns the use of actual historical maps. Sometimes these will be useful and add greatly to the campaign. I have, for example, a thin (and worn!) colour atlas printed as a free giveaway with an issue of the Daily Mail from 1940. Its fully detailed, showing the new 1940 borders and all relevant shipping lanes, rail-links and cities. For a WWII game it is a very valuable resource. But of course the further back you go the less useful these 'real' maps are. I have a photograph of the very first map ever found (a Babylonian map of the world) and believe me, it is absolutely useless as a game resource! Now as the model for my own version... that's different!

I mentioned the GM's screen at the beginning of the article. I've never actually used a screen, my games are universally rules-lite enough to get away with a clipboard and a couple of dice, but a lot of GMs do use them. If the players can live without the tables and charts they display then I recommend you exploit the 'in-your-face' nature of the screen. Plaster it with a montage of historical pictures pertinent to the period. Anything, authentic or not. A movie still from *Gladiator* or *The Messenger*, a copy of the Pompeii mosaic depicting the Battle of Gaugamela, a painting of a ship of the line, a photo of Stukas diving on a British artillery position. Inspiring. Visually stunning. Atmospheric.

Before I wrap up this discussion of player props, I should warn you about the overuse of player handouts. Years ago, our AD&D referee unveiled a Viking-inspired campaign complete with a ream of hand-written essays on Viking mythology and culture. He insisted we read these before we created our characters - to groans and sighs of despair. So we pretended to speed read the lot and got on with playing the game; needless to say it didn't endear the campaign to us much! Never mind the historical setting, you should always begin your game with action (and by that I mean in-character play not spoon-fed exposition).

Obviously, by virtue of running your game in some past-time you are going to have to explain some (or all!) aspects of the setting to the players. Perhaps the best way to do this is with an orientation sheet (not sheets!) for their consumption during character generation. Include the most important facts as they relate to available character types. Note that the flourishes you might apply to character sheets are equally effective on this orientation sheet. A couple of well chosen pictures (of people and places) could be worth a helluva lot more words.

Before the game-proper kicks off, you could always hand them a second orientation sheet with a few details of daily life and more campaign-specific information. Avoid essays at all costs!! This warning also applies to setting information you might find in an RPG supplement (such as a GURPS worldbook). Pick out the pertinent facts and put them on an orientation sheet instead.

I've got plenty more to say on Out of Game props and Character Props, so please join me next month! Meanwhile, if you have any tricks or tips of your own I'd be happy to hear them.

Historical Props part 2

Historical Props Part 3

I want to finish up my review of props used to add atmosphere to an historical RPG. In the first part of this 'mini-series' I looked at in-game props, used and handled by the players themselves. Last month I looked at props that represent objects used by the characters actually within the game world. Here I want to discuss those out-of-game props that don't necessarily represent anything real within the game world, but simply add to the historical atmosphere and ambience.

Before I begin, however, I want to share a strange experience with you. I've been preparing a Lord of the Rings game for a group of children and needed to come up with a Tolkienesque introductory scenario. The first place I looked for ideas was in the copious historical annals of Middle Earth included at the back of the back of Return of the King. I was searching for a certain set of parameters. I wanted a quest or trek, I wanted the plot to be important to Middle Earth, I wanted to party of adventurers to be important people and not just outlaws or mercenaries, and I wanted there to be a full-on evil menace threatening the land. As I searched for something that could meet all of these goals I realised that I was using the same techniques I used to pick a historical setting. I go to the historical records with a 'wish-list' and try to identify the best fit date/event/location. The irony was not lost on me - here I was scouring a fictional history of a fictional world trying to find an 'historically accurate' event I could base a campaign around. Why not go with the flow and create a fictional event of my own, or alter the timeline to suit my purposes? Well of course that's a valid approach, but by adhering to a fictional history you maintain consistency and give the players a firm anchor around which they can base their characters.

Sometimes (as in 'real' history) things happen at the most inappropriate times, and plots must conform to a number of historical parameters (e.g. 'there were no orcs in the Misty Mountains at that time', or 'the Rohirrim had not colonized Rohan until T.A. 2510'). My advice is to exploit the timeline, don't let it dominate your games and screw up your plot ideas. Accept that it will from time-to-time dictate to you what is, or is not, possible, but scour those chronologies and pull events from them to give every scenario a direct link to the source material. You can go out and kill trolls in any D&D game going, but only in Middle Earth can you hunt down the hill trolls of the Coldfells north of Rivendell in revenge for their murder of Arador, proud Dunedain and grandfather of Aragorn. Every entry has the possibility to be a thread to bind a scenario to Middle Earth.

OK, why use out of game props? Why not? As with the other props I've discussed in earlier installments of this column, use them if the benefits outweigh the difficulties. Do you want to go to the trouble? Do you think your players will accept the idea? Can you think of any suitable props? If the answer to any of these is no - then think

again. Out of game props are just an over-the-top flourish, a luxury and a little bit of theatre to get players and GMs in the mood. These props could never be described as necessary!

Food is a common feature of most gaming tables, mostly limited to Coke, chips and Mountain Dew, right? Well that's all fair enough, but I can tell you that it used to be an uphill struggle to convey the atmosphere of a dusty Mexican village in 1887 while sat in my dark Canterbury basement in the middle of winter. So we bought a bag of nachos and a salsa dip - from there the obsession with out-of-game props began. At the next session of my homebrew spaghetti western we noshed chili with sour cream and followed it up with a drop of Tequila ... and another bag of nachos, this time with a guacamole dip. I knew that somewhere in my sprawling tape collection I'd got a copy of Ennio Morricone's spaghetti western soundtrack album, so I dug it out and played it in the background to great effect! I'm not quite sure any of it transported us 'as if by magic' to 19th century Mexico, but it certainly proved to be the most memorable session I ever GM'd. All the players got into it with a passion I'd not really seen before. I suppose the focus of the game was tight, and it was reinforced by the food, the drink and the music. The props on their own did not bring much 'historicality' to the sessions - but I think they stopped player's minds from wandering.

Of course it helped that we gamed at the kitchen table, and that they all loved the food. It was a slightly different matter during an Edwardian horror game. My sister was a player and had insisted we game at her place where she put on a spread of finger food. Not particularly inspiring, but I returned the favour the week after when the player characters had been invited to dine with a Lord and Lady at their country estate. I made the players drink tea from cups (with saucers .. arrgh the cultured horror!!!) and eat cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off (yuk!). To get rid of the taste we then had scones and cream. I borrowed a tablecloth for the occasion and those weird snowflake paper thingies (which my wife reliably informs me are called 'doilies'). As a point of interest I did lay the table before-hand and announced that anything consumed was 'in-character.' I must admit I was greatly impressed when the gruff sergeant tipped his tea onto his saucer and drank from that! And equally impressed with my sister who drank her tea so daintily. These are details missing from my usual historical games ... all in all the session had a cultured air about it which I put down in some measure to my culinary excesses. This was all blown away of course when the game turned into a 'hunt the lord and lady werewolves in the underground passages' type game.

My favourite foods came into play during a game set in the Persian Empire. With a bit of online research I served my players Persian rice (full of nuts and fruits) with naan bread and mint yoghurt. I know it was completely unhistorical, but Turkish Delight rounded off the meal and gave the food a decadent feel. For drinks I served up my own variation of the Persian sherbet (fruit juices mixed with water, sugar and crushed ice).

My one mistake was to serve Japanese sake during a Tokugawa Era game. Now I like the stuff (after the first few sips). The players, however, hated it. The game was also notorious for the Japanese court music I played for the first ten minutes of the session. Discordant, slow, painful - my players insisted I turn it off. The sake and the imperial music killed things for a while, but luckily the game picked up and both were forgotten.

Providing a soundtrack for an historical game is actually a lot easier than providing the food. One of the easiest ways is to get hold of a movie soundtrack that matches your chosen era. The Mission, Elizabeth, Braveheart, Ben Hur, Gladiator, and Prince of Egypt are all groovy. Being soundtracks, of course, they have few lyrics and I find that lyrics intrude into the game a little too much. My tastes run to fairly instrumental works; but this isn't a hard and fast rule. When I ran my first GURPS Atomic Horror playtests I often played a Fifties rock n'roll compilation album to give the sessions both that 'not here, not now' feel as well as a sense of irreverence and teen-movie schlockiness. I tried the same technique with Sixties pop music for a Vietnam War game, this time the songs were so damn good that they intruded too much! Instead I opted for a 'sounds of the jungle' CD which replaced Nancy Sinatra's Boots with parrot squawks, Mick Jagger's Black Paint with insect song and Jim Morrison's Riders with the monsoon thunder.

I know that I'm not alone in my use of soundtracks during RPG sessions as the very useful Aural Sects column (dedicated to this subject) illustrated. I rarely use music in non-historical games, however. My intention is to provide an aural wallpaper on which I can paint my historical game. I don't use music to evoke mood or theme or a sense of action or mystery. This I try to obtain through my GMing skills. I use music to evoke a sense of time and place.

Exactly how do you tell whether your chosen historical soundtrack is on the mark or a mind-numbing aggravation? From my experience there are a number of essential don'ts:

- Don't repeat the same track over and over during a game, no matter how cool you think it is. After three hours even you won't be able to stomach the song any more.
- Don't play a soundtrack that is 'discordant,' that suddenly changes from quiet serene music to loud ear-catching music. It grabs everyone's attention - and you should have that.
- Don't play music (especially lyrical - pop/rock/etc.) that everyone knows and likes. Do you really want your Roman gladiators giving an impromptu sing-along of The Beatles' 'Strawberry Fields?' Don't ask me why a GM would use The Beatles as a backing track for a Roman setting, though! Maybe for theme?
- Keep the volume low. This is without doubt the Golden Rule. Sometimes it only has to be barely audible with much of it being picked up subconsciously. Isn't that what we really want?
- Don't fiddle with the music system except to maybe turn-over the tape and press play, and remember to keep talking while you do this. Again, everyone's attention becomes focussed on a change of tape or CD. Of course, CDs take care of themselves don't they?

You could take this out-of-game ambience one step further and adopt historical costumes. This isn't something I've experienced, however - but I know it's been done before. In fact the rise of 1930s murder mystery events in Britain is proof of this! LARPer's will be much more at ease with this aspect of historical gaming and much better clued up on what to wear and how to create that look. Many of my games only last a few weeks and it only takes a day or two to rustle up a meal and a suitable soundtrack. Historical costumes require more thought and more time to organize.

Of course the ultimate historical prop is to roleplay in- (or out-of) costume in an authentic or even reproduction historical setting. However, the chances to roleplay Privateers & Gentleman on board the HMS Victory, or FVLMINATA inside the ruins of the Colosseum must be pretty slim. Ingenuity might instead be exploited to achieve the same end. Perhaps a game session in the woods might stand in for Sherwood Forest. A game of Call of Cthulhu might gain in atmosphere if a room at the local library is for hire. Any Medieval game would benefit from being played out in a church hall (and in the UK I don't think this is much of a problem). It all boils down to 'where can we play?' and make a decision based on that. It would be easy for me to get a game of Ars Magica organized and run the session as an afternoon picnic in the grounds of a Medieval monastery or on the Medieval walls of York, or in the shadow of Scarborough Castle's smashed keep, the crash of waves against the cliffs rumbling in the background. But this approach requires daylight, good weather, and the lack of essentials (fridge, CD player, chairs, table, endless drinks and snacks and a handy toilet). I still think that it's something to consider.

I'd be interested to hear of any examples, though ... The craziest session setting I've so far heard of is the marathon Mountains of Madness campaign that Steve Ellis (who posts as SJE on the RPG forums) ran a few months ago. Steve is currently writing up his experiences for us to share, but I can tell you that they involved hiring out an abandoned lighthouse for an entire week, and roleplaying Cthulhu almost non-stop. The phrases 'nightmarish,' 'sanity-blasting,' 'filled with dread,' and 'gibbering' come suddenly to mind. I can't wait to hear the full story!

Adapting That Favourite Book

"[Vesuvio] now clearly saw that the Grove of Daphne was a love spot, a nest created from the most lucious trees, plants, and flowers of nature which composed a bordello roofed by the twinkling stars, a meeting place for sexual practices where the only price was willingness and a mutual agreement."

- Simon Finch, Pagan Voyager

I discovered the books of Simon Finch when I used to bunk off school (age 14). Avoiding maths lessons like the plague I would roam the town library and bookshops looking to satisfy my desire to read erotic literature. At 14, I figured, reading about sex was the closest I was going to get! Having a passing interest in Rome from movies like The Fall of the Roman Empire, The Robe, and Ben Hur, I spotted a book set in the reign of emperor Hadrian called Golden Voyager. And lo! It contained explicit sex scenes! The stories themselves, as well as the recreation of Rome in its decadence, was done rather well, and the explicit nature of the (prolific) sex scenes simply added to the debauchery and debasement. From that moment on I was hooked on the ancient world and Rome has forever (in my eyes) been synonymous with cruelty, sexual humiliation and pornography.

What's this got to do with adapting books to roleplaying settings? Golden Voyager was essentially my first historical novel. I've never been a prodigious reader of fiction, and so my diet of historical novels has been rather low, but I still appreciate their existence and I'm glad that there is a healthy market for characters like Cadfael and Falco.

Let's say you want to run a historical game set during the aftermath of D-Day, do you pick up *The History of World War II*, edited by AJP Taylor, backed up by a few books on weapons and warfare, or do you opt for Stephen E. Ambrose's bestseller, *Band of Brothers*? The first gives you masses of general information, maps, overviews, critical essays, lots of stats for weapons and vehicles and so on. The second gives you a close-up view of your chosen subject, as experienced by someone who was there, and focuses on personal feelings, experiences and day-to-day problems. It is (obviously) Stephen E. Ambrose's book which has the most to offer the historical GM.

When a major historical movie or TV series is commissioned, rarely does the production company hire screenwriters to come up with a good script. And rare is the screenwriter who sits down to write the true account of a certain historical event. Instead, screenwriters often turn to an already published book which they can easily adapt. Rather than flounder around trying to write the script for the Raid of Entebbe from a dozen different perspectives, the screenwriter will invariably pick up the published book of an eyewitness to the drama, and adapt it into a movie which will follow the story from that person's viewpoint. 'Based on a true story' invariably means that someone's book will be featured in the credits.

When it comes to historical roleplaying games it really does pay to utilise historical novels (which are nothing more than fictional eyewitness accounts of historical events). Yes, more generalised books give you information on religion, architecture, costume, economy and warfare, but an historical novel draws you in, it paints a 3D picture of life. You can step out of dry academic text and move into an approximation of 'real' life as it must have seemed, with emotions, politics, grudges, wonder, and beauty. My advice is to use one historical novel as a primary source for your campaign, and then a number of general non-fiction history books as reference to back it up.

My subject is the ancient world, and I've used this technique in the past (to a greater or lesser degree) with the following historical novels:

Bernard Cornwell, Stonehenge
Paul Doherty, The Mask of Ra
Robert Graves, I, Claudius
Christian Jacq, Ramses
Robert Silverberg, Gilgamesh the King
George Shipway, Warrior in Bronze

Obviously there are hundreds and hundreds of historical novels out there, and I'm sure everyone one of you has their own favourites. What I'm encouraging is not the historian's mindset of assessing all of your evidence and producing a campaign based on your final assessment. It is the novelist's mindset of following one viewpoint to the exclusion of all others, never mind the odd historical inconsistency. Pick up the book, use the date it is set in, the locations, and even the over-arching plot. Any other resources you have at hand should be modified to fit the novel, not the other way around. If your novel is a good one (meaning it sticks to accepted historical thinking) then matching your non-fiction resources to the book shouldn't prove to be too much of a problem.

My latest adaptation involves Bernard Cornwell's *Stonehenge*, a book which is set circa 2000 BC and charts the building of the sarsen phase of this famous English monument. Since this is prehistory any attempt to base a campaign in this era on non-fiction archaeology books will leave massive holes in all the wrong places. We have no knowledge of language, of personal or tribal names, of names for rivers or islands, we have no certain knowledge of politics or economic practices, of religion or superstitious customs and beliefs. A well researched book like *Stonehenge* gives us all of that, laid out onto a sound archaeological foundation. As I built up my 2000BC campaign, I mined the following things from Bernard Cornwell's book:

- Character names
- Names of places (including alternatives, local names, nicknames etc.)
- Descriptions of landscapes and locations
- Descriptions of different groups, cultures and organizations
- Character descriptions sketched out as NPCs
- Relationships between groups, factions, cultures and organizations
- Lore - often religious, including reconstructed details of customs and rituals; but also legends, magic and the occult, with gaps imaginatively filled in to create a seamless whole (something that non-fiction almost never strives to do).

I used my non-fiction sources to back all of this up with more detail, more NPCs, and new places and locations, all following Cornwell's naming system. I designed maps that charted out Cornwell's world, and I filled in the blanks based on hints in the book and what I'd read outside of the novel. At the end of the process I had a living breathing world with a nomenclature and language all of its own, as well as a very distinct (non-academic) mindset. It had become the perfect roleplaying environment. Including elements of *Stonehenge*'s plot (albeit set sometime in the novel's future) gave the campaign a direction, movement and energy which it otherwise would've lacked. In comparison, I see no exuberance, no dramatic imperative, and no over-arching threat to the world of 2000BC in David Souden's dry *Stonehenge, Mysteries of the Stones and Landscape*.

There's one more great benefit to using a single historical novel (or series) as the basis for a roleplaying campaign: player familiarity. I've always found that feeding players worthwhile information on a new historical period is a very difficult task. You have to tread a fine line between raw exposition (typed up introductory sheets, etc.) and giving setting information away 'in-game' so as not to slow down the game. A good movie set in the same era can certainly get everyone interested in the period, but is rarely enough to supply all of that detail. What does *Gladiator* tell you about the relationship of Roman people to their government? What does the inside of a Roman villa look like?

An historical novel, handed to a player prior to the game makes for an easy introduction to the era in question. It also combines period detail with sample character types, contemporary issues and politics and often aspects of geography. A novel isn't as accessible as either a movie or a couple of pages of the GM's notes, but it does deliver a lot of information in an enjoyable and easily digestible package. Just make sure the novel isn't an intimidating blockbuster that will never get finished. Something quick to read that may take a week or even just a weekend is perfect. If the books come in a series you could hand a different one to each player so that they are all reading at the same time and don't have to share the

book. Of course I realise that some players won't want to get this involved - but the idea is there for those groups who want to take that step.

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Contact Paul Elliott at zozer@btinternet.com