

# The Grey Realms

This is a setting module for use with NUGGET, a trimmed-down version of the LODE system, available for download from [www.silverbranch.co.uk](http://www.silverbranch.co.uk). It's fairly generic fantasy with a few twists. If you want details of geography and suchlike, you'll have to provide them yourself. This module may evolve over time: this is version 1.1.

This setting is written as a somewhat tongue-in-cheek reworking of common fantasy elements, and would work well for a humorous game - but could also be used in a more serious way. It's a world where people are flawed, from the gods on down, and the darker side of human (etc) nature tends to shine through. So players can either join in with that or try to shine out as examples of virtue. Whether to play it lid-off (high-energy) or lid-on (gritty) is up to the GM.

## Gods

Most fantasy settings have lots of gods with different remits, and this one is no exception. They are beings of huge power, but not aloof and infallible - they have emotions and conflicts like those of mortals and make mistakes (though it's rash to point this out). The lesser races attempt to curry their favour and can call on this "credit" for aid.

There's a small number of elder gods, and an uncountable number of lesser ones covering fairly specific areas of influence, with all sorts of politics between them. Players can invent the second sort as they wish. The existence of many gods with different agendas accounts for the peculiar variety of species in a fantasy world. There are not gods specifically "of" races: intelligent species are created by one or more Gods of Something and then adopt them as their patrons.

I've ripped off Mesopotamian mythology to an extent here. The known **elder gods** are:

- Elal - god of sky, weather, strength and rulership
- Eaki - god of water, knowledge and craft
- Ashtir - goddess of love, fertility and war

Among the **lesser gods** three are of greatest importance. Shamutu the sun and Nansin the moon represent the day and night, mark the passage of time and serve as divine judges, watching all that happens below. Ninmuzi, Who Dies and Returns, represents agriculture and the power of the land to sustain life, and appears in male and female forms. Other lesser gods might cover plague, lust, trade, animals, plants, and so on. The more specific they are the less power they have, with fewer worshippers advancing their cause and fewer gods seeking alliances - the horned god of animals is widely sought, but the shadowy goddess of thievery is left to make her own way until someone needs something specific. Some gods are thoroughly nasty, but thoughtfully provide their servants as smiting fodder.

## Races

*Quirks* give a character an Advantage or Disadvantage in certain situations, adding individuality and fine-tuning to more detail than skills. In a full LODE game there's a big list of Quirks available to all characters. You could allow all NUGGET characters to take an extra positive-negative pair.

## Elves

They were the first intelligent species created by the gods, and they are immortal. This turned out to be a very bad idea. The elves are not completely adapted to their immortality, so as the years drag on they become desperate for any diversion to chase away the tedium. Most engage in debaucheries of all kinds, and they have a reputation for it. They're also known for their knowledge and skills, which they generally keep from the "lesser" races to maintain superiority. They can develop great technical ability in the arts, but are often lacking in passion. They have children relatively rarely, but as they don't die off there was a time long ago when they existed in excessive numbers and the gods created the orcs to cull them. Elves find it hard to like orcs - they'd still be angry if they could be bothered.

**Special:** *Regeneration* (an elf can heal 2 Injuries in a day, and will return from death within an hour unless the body is destroyed sufficiently to make this impossible - balanced by extra negative Quirks)

**Quirks:** *Older Than I Seem* (3 extra skill levels), *Attractive Appearance* (Adv for appropriate social rolls); *Jaded* (Dis to resist persuasion to do something that'll provide interesting sensations; Brains roll to avoid taking an opportunity you spot yourself, whether it's wise and proper or not), *Poor Reputation* (Dis in social situations with other races where morals or integrity are involved), *Poor Memory For Trivia* (Dis to recall something that didn't seem important at the time - remembering centuries of life results in trade-offs), *Passionless* (Dis for an attempt to convey emotion, like speaking to rouse a crowd)

## Dwarves

They are short, stocky people who are really made out of the earth, although they have living flesh (albeit unusually dense). Each Dwarfhold is a colony ruled by two princes who have the ability to sculpt new individuals out of clay and stone. They are sexless creatures, lacking the relevant biological equipment and psychological drives. However, they do have the impulse to create, and most of them are pretty good at working with stone, metal and jewels. Minor works seem to be popular with other races, so they have trade links. They live close to the earth that spawned them, in tunnel complexes bored into the rock. Dwarves can live a long time, but eventually wear out and are replaced. Their society is practical and egalitarian. The princes rule, but they're assisted by advisors and replacement princes are selected on merit.

**Special:** *Resilience* (one automatic success to resist physical injury and discomfort - Adv for sustaining

physical effort over a long period – however, their dense flesh gives them a tendency to sink in water, fall through fragile floors, etc, giving a Dis in some situations)

**Quirks:** *Used to the Dark* (Adv for getting around in low light), *Good With Minerals* (Adv for crafting); *Poor With People* (Dis for understanding society of other races), *Poor With Magic* (Dis for casting spells)

## Orcs

They were created by a small group of gods concerned about the way the elf population grew over the centuries. Orcs were specifically designed to cull elves. In appearance they combine aspects of human and beast. They're not stupid, but their culture does not value academic education. They can track elves by scent, and are trained to fight opponents with centuries of experience and superior equipment. (As elves can only be killed by total destruction, orcs need techniques for making sure this happens once their quarry is downed. They would probably settle on the most simple, direct method – they eat them. If you don't like that, say elf flesh is considered tainted and have them burned instead.) The Great Blood is long over and the gods are not concerned about elf numbers any more, so the orcs are largely forgotten. Their society is changing. Some stick to the "old ways" of nomadic elf-hunting in small bands with evocative names. Others are trying to build their own civilisation, merging bands together into "parties" with ever-longer composite names and settling permanently in a territory. Some are even able to cooperate with elves for short periods.

**Special:** *Keen Senses* (Adv for all perception rolls - automatic ability to scent when an elf is nearby, which extends to tracking by scent under good conditions – brings a Dis to resist sensory overload like dazzling light, and they prefer not to operate under full sun)

**Quirks:** *Tireless* (Adv for extended physical activity), *High Pain Threshold* (Adv for resisting injury); *Poor Education* (Dis for recalling knowledge or performing cerebral tasks), *Ugly Appearance* (Dis for appropriate social rolls in non-orc groups)

## Hobblings

Long ago, a god forcibly evolved an entire species of rodent to humanoid form. So the Hobbling race is built on extinction - but they themselves are annoyingly cheerful. They stand about 3 feet tall, and look quite like humans except for extra body hair and liquid brown eyes. They have hearty appetites, easily eating as much as a human and rarely refusing food put in front of them. (They're also quite keen on \*ahem\* close personal relations.) They're curious and, in some ways, rather unworldly, and often get into trouble but then manage to escape unharmed. Perhaps in an attempt to redress their standing with other races, hobblings tend to have rather grand-sounding (though rustic) names. Their homes are built in burrows in banks and hillsides.

**Special:** *Small* (Dis on attempts to hit you, but successful hits do +1 damage; -1 on your base damage; Adv for sneaking and hiding OR Adv + Brawn starts at Poor)

**Quirks:** *Fearless* (not so much bravery as a failure to understand terror and intimidation; Adv to resist), *Lucky* (once per scene, take a free re-roll or ask the GM for a

minor coincidence to your benefit), *Nimble Fingered* (Adv for tasks involving fine manipulation); *Curious* (make a Brains roll to avoid investigating something interesting but potentially dangerous); *Irritating* (Dis when you want to get tolerance or respect from other races); *Naive* (Dis for understanding scheming, treachery, violence, etc); *Tastes Like Chicken*

## Combat

**Shields** give an Advantage for defence rolls. **Armour** falls into the following 3 brackets, subtracting its rating from incoming damage. This rating also acts as a penalty for actions where good mobility is needed, like acrobatics, climbing or sneaking (but not ordinary combat actions), and for praying (it muffles the voice - "He wants a plague of dice?!") and spellcasting (restricting arcane gestures). (NUGGET can't be bothered with multiple layers or pieces - take an overall rating of 1-3 but feel free to let the penalties stack up.)

- 1 Light - padded clothing, soft leather
- 2 Medium - rigid leather, ringmail, chainmail
- 3 Heavy - plate

## Miracles

Those who do notable things on behalf of a god (with a conscious intent to be "in the name of") build up a pool of **Favour** points linked to that deity - usually 1 point per act, but something very notable might get 2.

Socially, you need to be a professional **priest** to be accepted as doing some god-related things - like holding a service (1 Favour if there's a reasonable number of sincere worshippers, but only once a day). Priests have the *Prayer* skill for calling on divine aid; *Divine Hierarchy* for knowledge about the gods, their areas of influence and relationships; and skills relating to knowledge, dealing with people, politicking and bureaucracy.

Anyone with Favour can call for **miracles** related to the god's area of influence. Successes on a Prayer + Will roll, BD 2 set the ceiling for the number of points you can spend. (If you fumble it the god is probably irritated by your constant whining - lose 1 Favour - but for larger effects you might get an unwanted miracle of similar level.) An Advantage for a task costs 1 point and only needs a Free action for a muttered invocation. Use a Full action and 1 point for guidance: a yes/no/maybe answer to one simple question about present or past events. Overtly magical effects need a Full action and cost 3 points, or 5 points for something big. For **competing miracles** compare Prayer successes to see what happens; double the successes if the god invoked is specifically relevant rather than generally applicable.

Someone with Favour can **lose** it by doing significant things to displease a god, which would include building up or drawing on a Favour pool with an opposed god. Favour can go negative this way, requiring penance. The GM should decide how fickle and labyrinthine the inter-relationships between gods are – it may be crucial for a priest to keep up to date with who they're allied with this week. Gods are fickle, and the GM should feel free to provide a divine slapping as a story element.

## Magic

“Magic” means supernatural effects caused by casting spells, which are learnable ways of manipulating universal energy. There are no spell lists - you decide what effect you want, then see how to do it. A spell is defined using a Change, a Subject, and a difficulty (highly abstracted). Changes and Subjects are sets of separate skills representing areas of magical knowledge, listed below. To cast the spell you must have some skill in at least one of them, but the level you use for the roll is the average of the two, rounding down. There may be more than one combination that produces a given effect.

### Change:

*Sympathy* - help, building things up, expansion, protection.

*Antipathy* - harm, breaking things down, limitation.

*Connection* - relationships, communication, movement.

*Control* - changes the behaviour of the subject without changing its nature, and summons elemental forces.

*Transformation* - changes the form or substance of the subject.

*Perception* - gains information about the subject.

### Subject:

*Elements* - includes all non-living materials and energy, so it's used for weather effects, alchemy, etc.

*Life* - physical changes in living (biological) beings.

*Thought* - all influence of the reason and emotions of living creatures, including perceptual illusions.

*Cosmos* - “behind the scenes” metaphysics of the world, including time, space, fate and the spirit realm.

This set-up means all mages are specialists to an extent, and it's good for players to add still more flavour by their choices. **Magic skills** are freely available to those who take “Mage” as their Occupation. Some other Occupations can take them only if bought specifically with points, and any Elf can buy them with their extra skill points, to a maximum of level 2 at start of play.

The **casting** roll uses Brains for complexity-type spells and Will for power-type spells. Identify one quantity which will be measured by final successes, usually duration (in rounds or duration levels: round > 5 minutes > hour > day > week > permanent if 1 Destiny spent) or intensity. Other quantities should be reflected by Adv or Dis on the roll.

There's no limit on the **number of spells** you can cast - except that each gives a mental Hurt unless you spend one of the casting successes to avoid it. With just one success you have to use the spell and take the Hurt.

If a casting roll **fumbles** the spell still goes off, but wrong somehow - strikes the caster or an ally, changes slightly or totally in nature (e.g. making an opponent stronger), etc. Roll the casting dice pool again (including any extra Advantages that were used). And the caster has to take the Hurt.

A living target normally gets some sort of roll to **avoid the effects**, usually Physical or Mental Resistance. Once the spell's finished its effects obey natural laws: ice melts, but rabbits do not turn back into people. One can attempt to **break an ongoing spell** on someone or something by rolling the appropriate skill + Brains, BD 0, against the original caster's pool, BD 2.

## Items

**Relics** are objects with a permanent charge of one specific god's power, usually reserved for priests in good standing. Once per scene, 1 Favour may be drawn out (the Prayer roll applies as normal). These are usually very obvious to a god's followers, and they will be very upset if somebody bearing one behaves inappropriately.

**Talismans** are objects which give an Advantage when using one of the facets of magic if they are used actively in the casting (waved around and suchlike). They may look quite ordinary, and an appropriate spell is required to divine their properties. Powerful mages are often keen to collect these.

**Enchanted items** hold a specific spell effect that can be triggered once per scene. (There may be activation conditions that need to be discovered before they can be used.) The dice pool for the cast is that of the mage who cast the spell into the item. To make one requires an extended ceremony, a successful roll to cast the spell at BD -2, and a Destiny Point. If the object is ever destroyed, the magic energy is released in one last (usually explosive) effect.

Those well-versed in either form of magic are expected to go around with all sorts of weird paraphernalia hanging about their persons. In the past, pre-emptive attacks against such persons led to the Tinkers' Guild adopting its distinctive badge and white headscarf or neckerchief.

## Sample Organisations

Members of the Bards' Guild spend most of their time on melancholy songs and poems about men/women/dwarves, often beautiful, noble, wealthy or otherwise a cushy number, who have kicked them out. They're of only minor use in spreading news of what's going on around the lands. The **Tinkers' Guild** has grown into this role. Originally they were just humble travelling menders of pans and knives, but today they think of themselves as “independent traders”. They travel from town to town with mules or carts full of stuff they picked up cheap back along the road. They're usually very willing to share information they've gathered in return for food, drink or lodgings. In a day or two they move on, leaving people with their purchases. The Guild proclaims its “strict requirements” for the veracity of news and the quality of merchandise. It also has good lawyers.

The **Houses of Finance** exist in all major cities. They are run by followers of Zurik, god of wealth and trade, and the temple is usually part of the same building or complex. Their motto is: “The gold must flow.” They mint coins, make loans, and preserve local markets from the effects of dumping large caches of ancient gold by moving resources between settlements. (Attempting to dispose of amounts above a certain limit without going through the Houses is an offence, often punished by guard duty on resource-transfer caravans in dangerous areas.) Each House has a staff of priests and clerks, led by a senior priest titled “Gnomon” as they show the way to prosperity like the pointer on a sundial.