

DEFINING FANTASY

by **Steven S. Long**

This article is my take on what makes a story Fantasy, the major elements that tend to appear in Fantasy, and perhaps most importantly what the different subgenres of Fantasy are (and what distinguishes them). I've adapted it from Chapter One of my book *Fantasy Hero*, available from Hero Games at www.herogames.com, by eliminating or changing most (but not all) references to gaming and gamers.

My insights on Fantasy may not be new or revelatory, but hopefully they at least establish a common ground for discussion. I often find that when people talk about Fantasy they run into trouble right away because they don't define their terms. A person will use the term "Swords and Sorcery" or "Epic Fantasy" without explaining what he means by that. Since other people may interpret those terms differently, this leads to confusion on the part of the reader, misunderstandings, and all sorts of other frustrating nonsense.

So I'm going to define my terms right off the bat. When I say a story is a Swords and Sorcery story, you can be sure that it falls within the general definitions and tropes discussed below. The same goes for Epic Fantasy or any other type of Fantasy tale.

Please note that my goal here isn't necessarily to persuade anyone to agree with me — I hope you will, but that's not the point. What I call "Epic Fantasy" you may refer to as "Heroic Fantasy" or "Quest Fantasy" or "High Fantasy." I don't really care. What I care about is that when I describe something as "Epic Fantasy," you understand what *I* mean by that term.

There's little I love more than discussing the ins and outs of Fantasy. If you'd like to offer your own comments on these subjects, suggest that I cover something I've left out, quibble (politely!) over terminology, ponder which category a given story belongs to, or whatever else, please visit the message boards and let 'er rip!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

What Is Fantasy?	2
Fantasy Subgenres	3
Crossworlds Fantasy	3
Epic Fantasy	4
High Fantasy	8
Low Fantasy	10
Swords And Sorcery	11
Urban Fantasy	13

WHAT IS FANTASY?

Before you can think about the different subgenres and elements of Fantasy, you have to define what Fantasy *is*, or else the vastness of the topic makes meaningful discussion (and game creation) impossible. Many books, movies, and television shows contain elements of the *fantastic*, but that doesn't necessarily make them *Fantasy* stories. For the purposes of this discussion, the following definition suffices: *a Fantasy tale tells a story, or depicts events and adventures, involving magic, alternate worlds, or both, so that the story could not take place in the "real world."* Fantasy differs from Science Fiction because a Science Fiction story depicts events the reader regards as possible — even if only in a distant future involving much more advanced technology (see *Star Hero*, by myself and Jim Cambias, for more on this subject). Fantasy, on the other hand, features *impossible* events: events dependent on something that doesn't exist in the real world (magic), or occurring in a fictitious otherworld. But despite the existence of impossible elements, a good Fantasy story has as much internal consistency and logic as stories set in the "real world."

Three major elements define Fantasy in the minds of most readers: magic; alternate worlds; and low technology.

MAGIC

"In ages gone," the Sage had said, his eyes fixed on a low star, "a thousand spells were known to sorcery and the wizards effected their wills. Today, as Earth dies, a hundred spells remain to man's knowledge, and these have come to us through the ancient books..."

—Turjan recalls his master's words in "Turjan Of Miir,"
by Jack Vance

The first, and most important, feature of Fantasy is *magic*. The existence and effects of magic almost define Fantasy by themselves; only the lowest of Low Fantasy (see below) settings completely lack magic.

Magic in Fantasy ranges from minor and rare to commonplace and powerful, depending on the subgenre (see below). In many cases it consists of cast spells and evoked effects that characters can command (or have used against them). However, the fact that magic *exists* doesn't necessarily mean it's something protagonists can wield. In some Fantasy worlds the magic is mostly an atmospheric element — a feature that may help or hinder the characters indirectly, but over which they exert little control.

ALTERNATE WORLDS

Holger's brain went into a spin. Was he really in the past? No, impossible. And yet Charlemagne was certainly a historical figure.

Ah, he had it. The Carolingian cycle, the Chansons de Geste, the later medieval prose romances and folk ballads. Yes, that fitted. Fairyland and Saracens, swan-mays and unicorns, witchcraft and Elf Hill, Roland and Oliver — Holy jumping Judas! Had he somehow fallen into a... a book?

—Holger Carlsen tries to figure out where he is in *Three Hearts And Three Lions*, by Poul Anderson

The second major defining aspect of Fantasy is *an alternate world*. Most Fantasy stories take place in a world that superficially resembles Earth (it has mountains and seas; there's a moon in the nighttime sky; people build cities, use swords, and ride horses), but also differs from it in important ways. For one thing, magic usually exists, and with it fantastic beasts (like griffins) and races (such as dwarves and elves). For another, the geography is unique, and often flavorfully-named. For many Fantasy stories, the better realized the world — the more detailed and flavorful the author makes it, the more "dramatic verisimilitude" it has — the better the tale.

An alternate world doesn't literally have to be *another* world. It could instead be a past, future, secret, or hidden part of the "real" Earth — settings that are in effect "alternate" even though they're not defined as a separate reality. This is a common convention of Urban Fantasy (see page 13), some historical fantasies, and settings like Jack Vance's "Dying Earth" which take place on Earth so many aeons from now that it's not recognizable as the same world.

LOW TECHNOLOGY

Lastly, and least importantly, most Fantasy stories feature low technology, similar to that possessed by medieval-era civilizations on Earth. Characters in Fantasy novels can't call each other on the phone, don't have indoor plumbing, and lack modern medicine. They wield swords, not guns; they ride on horses, not in cars; they have to use muscle power instead of engines and electricity.

Of course, a few Fantasy stories diverge from this rule. The most common exception is Urban Fantasy, which by definition takes place in a "modern" world of automobiles and television. Urban Fantasy games that push into the near future may even feature technology that's *more* advanced than what's currently available on Earth. The second is settings where magic has replaced technology. Rather than making guns that work with gunpowder, the inhabitants of these settings have enchanted pistols that fire through pure magic.

This time their preparations were well thought out. The Mouser carried a mallet and a stout iron pry-bar, in case they had to attack masonry, and made certain that candles, flint, wedges, chisels, and several other small tools were in his pouch. Fafhrd borrowed a pick from the peasant's implements and tucked a coil of thin, strong rope in his belt.

—Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser
prepare to go after a treasure in
"The Jewels In The Forest,"
by Fritz Leiber

FANTASY SUBGENRES

Like Science Fiction, Superheroes, Martial Arts, or any other major genre, Fantasy has several major "subgenres," each with its own distinct themes, features, conventions, and elements. Although all Fantasy subgenres tend to share the three factors described above, and sometimes two or more subgenres mix together, for gaming purposes it helps to analyze them individually.

CROSSWORLDS FANTASY

Crossworlds Fantasy involves stories in which the protagonists are people from the real world who somehow cross over into a Fantasy world and become involved in adventures there. Because they're different — they come from another world — it's possible for them to become heroes. Often they're the subjects of prophecy, or possess some power, ability, or insight that inhabitants of the Fantasy setting lack.

Crossworlds Fantasy is less a subgenre than a *meta*-subgenre. You can apply it as an "overlay" to other types of Fantasy, such as Epic, High, or Low. Most Crossworlds stories involve High or Epic Fantasy.

In many Crossworlds Fantasy stories, such as *The Chronicles Of Narnia* or *The Weirdstone Of Brisingamen*, the protagonists are children — perhaps precociously intelligent and insightful, but still children. However, this doesn't hinder them in the Fantasy world. Because of their "special" nature in the Fantasy realm, adults treat them as equals, and they may in fact possess awesome magical powers (though they may not have much skill at using them in the early part of the story).

Since crossing worlds means spending some time in the "real world," Crossworlds Fantasy sometimes seems similar to Urban Fantasy (especially when the crossing of realities only means going to secret or hidden places on Earth that ordinary mortals lack access to). The main difference between the two lies in the fact that in an Urban Fantasy, the events of the story still take place in "the real world" (even if a secret or hidden part of it), while in a Crossworlds tale, the action only really begins when the characters cross the borders of reality into another realm. Furthermore, the trappings of modern-day life tend to play into Urban Fantasy, whereas they have little (if any) effect on Crossworlds Fantasy.

Examples of Crossworlds Fantasy include *The Chronicles Of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles Of Thomas Covenant* trilogy and *Mordant's Need* duology by Stephen Donaldson, J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" novels, Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts And Three Lions*, deCamp and Pratt's "Compleat Enchanter" stories, Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* trilogy, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court*, Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone Of Brisingamen*, and Roger Zelazny's *Changeling* and *Madwand*.

"May I ask, O Lucy Daughter of Eve," said Mr. Tumnus, "how you have come into Narnia?"

"Narnia? What's that?" said Lucy.

"This is the land of Narnia," said the Faun, "where we are now; all that lies between the lamp-post and the great castle of Cair Paravel on the eastern sea. And you — you have come from the Wild Woods of the West?"

"I — I got in through the wardrobe in the spare room," said Lucy.

"[I]f only I had worked harder at geography when I was a little Faun, I should no doubt know all about those strange countries. It is too late now. ... Daughter of Eve from the far land of Spare Oom where eternal summer reigns around the bright city of War Drobe, how would it be if you came and had tea with me?"

—Lucy enters Narnia and meets
the faun Tumnus in *The Lion, The
Witch, And The Wardrobe*,
by C.S. Lewis

CROSSWORLDS FANTASY ELEMENTS

In addition to the central element of “the protagonists come from another world,” the following conventions tend to define much of Crossworlds Fantasy:

ALLEGORY, ANALOGY, AND METAPHOR

More so than other types of Fantasy stories, Crossworlds Fantasy has a predilection for allegory, analogy, and metaphor. Sometimes it seems as if every person, event, creature, and place “stands for” something. Perhaps the best-known example is the *Narnia* stories, which are generally considered to have elements of Christian allegory (such as the lion Aslan representing Jesus Christ), but many others exist.

A PAUCITY OF HUMANITY

While humans are commonplace in most Fantasy stories (and sometimes the only race around), in some Crossworlds Fantasy stories they exist barely, if at all. In this case the crossover heroes are noteworthy for their unusual race as much as their abilities or powers, though some of the “natives” may be *almost* human. The lack of humans tends to occur more frequently in Fantasy movies, such as *Labyrinth*, but does occur in some written stories.

TALK, TALK, TALK

In many Crossworlds Fantasy lands, animals can talk! In some cases, inanimate objects can talk, too. And anything that can talk, can converse intelligently (though sometimes obsessively about a favorite topic). A talking horse can carry on a perfectly ordinary discussion with his rider, for example, but a talking tree may constantly steer the conversation back toward its complaints about the weather.

SOCIAL COMMENTARY

In much the same way that some Crossworlds Fantasy stories are written as allegory, some contain aspects of social commentary. The events of the story mirror events in the characters’ own world, or the adventures they experience have some bearing on the current state of affairs in their normal lives.

Something very curious indeed had come out of the cabin in the poop and was slowly approaching them. You might call it — and indeed it was — a Mouse. But then it was a Mouse on its hind legs and stood about two feet high. ... “My humble duty to your Majesty. And to King Edmund, too.”

—Lucy, Edmund, and Eustace meet Reepicheep the Mouse in *The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*, by C.S. Lewis

THE PERSPECTIVE IS...

Variable. In Crossworlds Fantasy written for children, or featuring children as protagonists, the perspective tends to be beneficent. While Evil exists, and bad things may happen, the heroes have the means to oppose and overcome them — a good heart and true, coupled with courageous determination, can see them through to victory (a fitting moral perspective for a children’s tale). In Crossworlds Fantasy with adult heroes, the perspective may be only subtly beneficent (as in High Fantasy), ranging to downright neutral or hostile.

EPIC FANTASY

“This is the One Ring that he lost many ages ago, to the great weakening of his power. He greatly desires it — but he must not get it.”

—Gandalf reveals to Frodo the central, epic, fact of *The Lord Of The Rings*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

Epic Fantasy stories feature grand, romantic, monumental stories of the heroes’ struggle against a vast, and often overwhelmingly powerful, enemy. Like Crossworlds Fantasy, Epic Fantasy is in many ways a meta-subgenre; a Fantasy novel could tell an Epic Low Fantasy story, Epic High Fantasy story, or the like.

Central to all Epic Fantasy stories is the concept of the *quest*: a striving toward a desired, and distant, end goal. In most cases the heroes’ quest literally involves a journey, as they travel over the map of the world toward a location of special significance (such as a mystic site where they can destroy an evil talisman, or the long-lost abbey to which they must return a sacred relic). Along the way, the heroes meet new friends, encounter and overcome obstacles, and confront their enemy(ies) in numerous guises. Some of them may not even make it the entire way, but new heroes may join the quest in midstream.

In the best Epic Fantasy, the quest transcends the literal journey or striving toward a goal to reach the level of the spiritual and personal as well. Epic heroes change, becoming better people as a result of their experiences. A hard-bitten or embittered character may learn sympathy and compassion, an immature one responsibility and duty, a selfish one the joys of serving others. A character with a destiny (such as a throne to win, or a powerful spell to obtain) may achieve it; one who's the object of prophecy may fulfill it. Sometimes the characters reach the end of their quest with different goals and desires than when they started out.

The quintessential Epic Fantasy saga is, of course, J.R.R. Tolkien's magnificent *Lord Of The Rings*, which influences just about every other work in this subgenre (not to mention most of the Fantasy genre). Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* can also be regarded as Epic Fantasy in many respects. The many imitators of Tolkien's work, such as Terry Brooks in *The Sword Of Shannara*, sometimes introduce variations on the standard Epic Fantasy themes, but the core of the subgenre always remains intact. Other examples include Patricia McKillip's "Riddle-Master" trilogy, *The Belgariad* series by David Eddings, Stephen Donaldson's *Chronicles Of Thomas Covenant The Unbeliever*, Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* trilogy, and some bodies of myth and legend (such as the Arthurian tales or parts of Norse mythology).

EPIC FANTASY ELEMENTS

In addition to the central element of the quest, the following conventions tend to define much of Epic Fantasy:

FREE WILL AND FATE

Despite the occasional use of prophecies, foretelling, and the like, Epic Fantasy characters and peoples are not slaves to fate. They have free will, and thus make their own destinies as much as they simply "achieve" them. Those who are Evil *choose* to be Evil, but even at the end of the story the chance to reform and repent often remains available — it is as much by his own rejection of the Good, as by the heroes' actions, that the enemy suffers defeat.

The theme of free will intertwines with the concept of fate and prophecy running through Epic Fantasy, but in a way that enhances free will. A character may be *fated* to do something, receive some gift, or manifest some power, but *how* he does that thing, and *what* he does with his gift or power, remains up to him. He can exercise his free will, choosing Good or Evil... for if no hard choices exist, heroism loses its meaning.

HEROIC QUALITIES AND PRESERVING THE GOOD

Epic Fantasy characters recognize that they are *heroes*, first and foremost, and that it's up to them to preserve the good, even if it means making great sacrifices. Frodo sacrifices his idyllic life and health to save Middle-earth from Sauron; Morgon of Hed gives up the land and principedom he loves to assume a role of power and leadership he doesn't want, because it's necessary for the preservation of the realm.

Epic Fantasy heroes tend to embody all the best qualities associated with the term "hero." They're noble, honorable, compassionate, self-sacrificing, valorous, honest, fair, wise, brave, and able to exercise restraint.

The desire to preserve the good introduces an inherent, albeit sometimes subconscious, element of conservatism into Epic Fantasy stories (and, for that matter, many other types of Fantasy). The implicit assumption is that "things should stay the way they are — there's no need for change, what we have is worth protecting." Of course, the story usually involves one major change (the elimination or diminishment of Evil), but that change itself serves the goal of maintaining the desired status quo.

HIGH STAKES AND POWERFUL ENEMIES

In Epic Fantasy, characters aren't trying to achieve short-term objectives or cope with minor problems. Their goals are epic in scope, and so are the obstacles they must overcome — trivial considerations like how much money the characters have rarely factor into the story. In most cases, the fate of the world lies in their hands: if they succeed, a new era of peace, truth, justice, and wisdom will prevail; if they fail, the world plunges into darkness, despair, and evil.

"You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so."

—Elrond points out the hand of fate at work in *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

"I believe that hitherto ... [Sauron] has entirely overlooked the existence of hobbits. You should be thankful. But your safety has passed. He does not need you — he has many more useful servants — but he won't forget you again. And hobbits as miserable slaves would please him far more than hobbits happy and free."

—Gandalf explains that the Shire is now in great peril in *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

"Sauron can torture and destroy the very hills."

—Galdor succinctly sums up the Dark Lord's enormous power in *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

“It’s only a story,” Garion insisted.

“Many good and solid men would say so,” the old man told him, looking up at the stars, “— good men who will live out their lives believing only in what they can see and touch. But there’s a world beyond what we can see and touch, and that world lives by its own laws.”

—Belgarath begins to peel back a bit of the veil of Garion’s ignorance in *Pawn Of Prophecy*, by David Eddings

[T]ogether they gazed through the branches northward. In the far distance, they saw a river running almost directly east, and beyond it the hills spread on to the horizon. But something more than the river separated these northern hills from those beside which the travelers had been walking since they had left Mithil Stonedown. The land beyond the river seemed to ripple in the morning sunshine, as if the quiet earth were flowing over shoals — as if there the secret rock of the Land ruffled the surface, revealing itself to those who could read it. From his high Woodhelven vantage, Covenant felt he was seeing something that surpassed even his new perceptions.

—Thomas Covenant drinks in the majesty of the Land in *Lord Foul’s Bane*, by Stephen Donaldson

The legends, histories, and lore to be found in the sources are very extensive. Only selections from them, in most places much abridged, are here presented.

—from the introduction to the appendices of *The Lord Of The Rings*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

Naturally, an epic story requires powerful, epic enemies. The most common type is the “Dark Lord,” usually modeled after Tolkien’s Sauron: a wizard, fallen god, or other incredibly powerful foe who’s utterly devoted to Evil. In most cases, the characters lack the power to confront Evil directly; if they do, the Dark Lord can easily destroy them. The only way to defeat this enemy, whose power and armies can easily overwhelm the forces of Good, is to act indirectly. They may slay his minions and cripple him, or exploit his Achilles’s heel — destroy the object containing his life-force or power; trick him by taking advantage of his fears and paranoias; or find a way to attract the attention and aid of his equally-powerful, but remote, peers (such as other, Good-aligned, gods who’ve removed themselves from the world).

THE NAIVE HERO

The central protagonist in many Epic Fantasy stories is an ordinary person — one who, though good-hearted, knows little of the world or what’s really going on in it. In other words, he’s a *naive hero*. Thrust into a situation he doesn’t understand and isn’t powerful enough to confront directly, with the help of strong allies he gradually learns and grows until he’s wise enough to win through to victory. In some cases, as with Garion in *The Belgariad*, he also has to grow into a legacy of power that helps him defeat Evil.

In a literary sense, the naive hero exists for two reasons. The first, and most practical, is that he gives the author a way to dispense information to the reader. The wise wizard or other helpers who accompany the naive hero on his quest answer his questions and tell him about what he may encounter, thus informing the reader about the Fantasy world. For example, Gandalf, by explaining things to Frodo, allows Tolkien to explain his world to people reading *The Lord Of The Rings*. Second, the weak, unknowing hero allows the author to layer a spiritual journey onto the physical journey of the quest. If the main character starts out powerful and wise, he rarely needs to grow very much, but a young and inexperienced hero has a long way to go “personally” as well as “professionally.”

THE NATURAL WORLD

The illustrations on the covers and interiors of Epic Fantasy stories often don’t depict characters — they depict sweeping natural vistas with stark mountains, broad forests, winding rivers, and sometimes glittering castles (or dark, brooding towers). The natural world, the landscape through which the characters move, plays a role in most Epic Fantasies. It both represents and is an aspect of the majesty and grandeur which characterize such stories. In some cases it even comes alive, with tree-men, river-gods, and mountain-spirits helping or hindering theprotagonists.

A RICHLY-DEVELOPED, WELL-ORDERED WORLD

Just like an Epic Fantasy requires epic heroes and epic enemies, it requires an epic scope — a vast canvas on which to paint the story of the fate of the world. Thus, Epic Fantasy worlds are usually highly detailed and richly developed. The author not only needs to have a map of the world and information about prominent characters, he should create an extensive history for his setting, and perhaps develop its languages, cultures, and other elements to a greater degree than normal.

Epic Fantasy worlds usually aren’t just detailed, they’re *ordered*. There’s a place for everything, and everything has its place... and more importantly, everyone in the setting recognizes that this is The Way Things Should Be. Followers, servants, and subjects obey their masters and kings because that’s how things should be in an ordered world. People respect wizards and men of learning because they should, even if those scholars possess little power. While the author can turn this convention on its head — for example, by using hordes of orcs to symbolize unreasoning submission to power-hungry leaders, or having a servant’s unquestioning obedience of the king create problems for the heroes — in most cases the orderliness of the world should remain a beneficial thing.

STARKLY-DRAWN CHARACTERS

Epic Fantasy stories depict worlds of black and white, where Good is Good and Evil is Evil, and never the twain shall meet. While some Good characters become traitors, and the possibility of reform and redemption remains open to at least some Evil enemies, it's easy to see where the average character stands thanks to the bright, primary colors in which the author draws the story — no shades of grey here! Death and/or disgrace is usually the ultimate fate reserved for those who betray their allies, though sometimes a former Evil enemy converts into a helpful Good companion.

Furthermore, Epic Fantasy characters are as cognizant of Good and Evil as the reader is. In most literature (Fantasy or otherwise), one of the common motivations for a character is trying to decide what “the right thing to do” is. Epic Fantasy characters rarely experience that sort of dilemma. They *know* what the right thing to do is — the question for them is whether they have the courage and ability (and sometimes means) to do it.

A TRAGIC NOTE

Lurking within many Epic Fantasy stories is a note of tragedy. Not only do the heroes have to commit acts of Heroic Sacrifice, but often in ending the threat of Evil they must set in motion events that have a tragic effect. For example, in *The Lord Of The Rings*, the destruction of the Ring and the downfall of Sauron leads in turn to the passing of the Elves and their great works of beauty and wonder. While no Elf would argue that the end should be otherwise, the loss is definitely tragic.

WISE AND POWERFUL WIZARDS

While Epic Low Fantasy is possible, most Epic Fantasy worlds and stories feature a heavy dose of magic — though not necessarily powerful magic in the throw-fireballs-and-summon-demons sense. Wise and powerful wizards exist, often in the role of chief aide and ally to the naive hero, and all but the most foolish and ignorant respect their learning and power. They don't even necessarily have to use their power often, because the reputation for power makes it unnecessary to exercise that power. Gandalf uses very little magic compared to the average roleplaying game wizard, for example, but nevertheless has a profound impact on the events of *The Lord Of The Rings*.

“I will have the future of this life, to waste or hold as I desire.”

—Lord Foul explains the extent of his evil ambition in *Lord Foul's Bane*, by Stephen Donaldson

[F]or the Third Age was over, and the Days of the Rings were passed, and an end was come of the story and song of those times. With them went many Elves of the High Kindred who would no longer stay in Middle-earth[.] “I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil.”

—from the ending of *The Lord Of The Rings*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

When maybe a thousand years had passed, and the first shadow had fallen on Greenwood the Great, the Istari, or Wizards first appeared in Middle-earth. It was afterwards said that they came out of the Far West and were messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron, and to unite all those who had the will to resist him; but they were forbidden to match his power with power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force and fear.

—the coming of the Five Wizards, as chronicled in the appendices of *The Lord Of The Rings*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

THE PERSPECTIVE IS...

Subtly beneficent. In most Epic Fantasies, the odds are heavily stacked against the heroes; the Evil enemy has much more personal power, larger armies, and greater strength than they do. But through nobility, valor, heroic determination, and heroic sacrifice, they can triumph — the “rules” of the world set things up so that, if sufficiently motivated, they *can* win despite the odds against them.

HIGH FANTASY

The subgenre of *High Fantasy* has as its primary defining characteristic the presence of extensive, common, and/or powerful magic and magical beings. While spells and spellcasters are rare in Low Fantasy, and often uncommon (at best) in Epic Fantasy, in some High Fantasy games you can't take ten steps without tripping over someone who can cast spells. Wizards tend to be (or can become) immensely powerful, able to dictate the fate of kingdoms (or worlds), bargain with dragons and gods on equal terms, and devastate entire regions with a single spell. Some High Fantasy setting creators take the magic one step further, making it so common and easy to use that it replaces technology. Almost everyone can cast a minor spell or two, merchants use magic to create their goods and stock their shelves, cities have mystical lighting at night, everyone has running water because of aquamancy spells, and people drive self-propelling enchanted wagons.

Furthermore, and equally as important, magic in High Fantasy is often completely reliable. Wizards know exactly what they can do, and how well they can do it. Anyone who can cast a spell can do so without difficulty or chance of failure. A spell, once cast, has a defined, specific (often absolute) effect, and may remain in effect for a long time (days, centuries, even forever).

The prevalence and power of magic in High Fantasy lets you introduce elements and objects loosely known as “wonders” into a story. Examples include knights using dragons, griffins, or unicorns as steeds, cities and castles built among the clouds, and thrones carved from single, enormous gemstones. After all, where powerful magic exists, anything is possible!

In the minds of gamers (and even to some extent readers), the conventions of High Fantasy are shaped less by literature than by the aesthetic and nature of the *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying game (and the various computer and video games inspired by it). This means most High Fantasy gaming campaigns, no matter what rules system one uses, tend to take on aspects of D&D. Thus, at its best, High Fantasy gaming allows for the creation of grand and wondrous stories of adventure and enchantment, often verging toward Epic Fantasy. At its worst, the subgenre often degenerates into nigh-mindless hack-and-slash campaigns devoted solely to killing monsters, getting treasure, and acquiring magical items.

Besides the typical *Dungeons & Dragons* gaming campaign, examples of High Fantasy include *Master Of The Five Magics* by Lyndon Hardy, the *Earthsea Trilogy* of Ursula LeGuin, some of Jack Vance's “Dying Earth” stories, some bodies of myth and legend (such as certain fairy tales and Greek myths), Steven Erikson's “Malazan Book of the Fallen” series, the *Deed Of Paksennarion* trilogy by Elizabeth Moon (a somewhat muted High Fantasy), Stephen Donaldson's *Chronicles Of Thomas Covenant The Unbeliever*, many of Steven Brust's novels, Roger Zelazny's *Jack Of Shadows*, and some of the tales written by Lord Dunsany and James Branch Cabell.

HIGH FANTASY ELEMENTS

In addition to the central element of powerful magic, the following conventions tend to define most High Fantasy worlds:

DUNGEONS

Thanks to the influence of *Dungeons & Dragons*, many High Fantasy stories and gaming campaigns feature adventures that take place in “dungeons” — underground cavern complexes and carved residences, or similar contained environments such as ruined castles. Filled with traps, eerie corridors, secret doors, sloping passages, and monsters (*lots of monsters*), dungeons present a significant, but easily defined, challenge for the heroes to overcome. In most cases, the goal of exploring a dungeon is to kill the monsters and take their treasure (including magical items). A properly constructed and executed dungeon tale can be enormous fun, combining character development/interaction, tactics, danger, and the thrill of discovery; a poor one is a slaughter-fest devoted to nothing but killing and looting.

“Do you remember dungeons, Joe? Party order? Remember the simple joys we took in Armor Class and random encounters? Whatever happened to moving silently down the corridor and checking for traps? YOU ENTER A 10' X 10' ROOM — AN ORC IS GUARDING A CHEST —”
—Blag the dwarf laments the passing of the old ways in the *Yamara* comic strip, by Barbara Manui and Chris Adams

GODS WALK THE EARTH

Just as there are no atheists in foxholes, there are precious few in High Fantasy worlds, since the gods exist and make their presence known every day. In most cases, they do so through organized, regimented priesthoods, whose members the gods grant the power to perform miracles such as healing injuries, curing disease, and creating food and water out of thin air. Sometimes the gods themselves manifest physically, either in person or through an “avatar.” But in many High Fantasy worlds a compact among the gods prevents this, forcing them to play out their divine struggles through worshippers and other mortal pawns. In High Fantasy, taking a god’s name in vain can be *really* dangerous, since he just might regard it as an invitation to show up and teach the character a little respect... though some High Fantasy characters are powerful enough to look on gods more as equals, or prey, than beings to fear.

MONSTERS AND FANTASTIC CREATURES

Dragons, manticores, unicorns, griffins, hydrae, basilisks, and countless other monstrous and/or fantastic creatures exist in High Fantasy settings — often as obstacles for the heroes to defeat, or enemies to overcome. Dragons, in particular, tend to be immensely powerful, possessing not only great physical prowess (and fiery breath!) but potent magical abilities as well.

Of course, High Fantasy authors don’t have to limit themselves to “traditional” monsters like chimerae and hippogriffs. In a world with common, powerful magic, insane or evil wizards often create their own custom-made monsters in the laboratory. The body of a lion, a dash of demon, and an infusion of dragon, and *voilà!* — you’ve got yourself a brand-new monster with which to bedevil the heroes.

PLANAR TRAVEL

Characters possessing vast magical power often don’t need to limit themselves to a single reality. Like the protagonists of Roger Zelazny’s *Amber* novels, they can journey from one plane to another as easily as a peasant takes a cartload of vegetables to market. While on quests, or simply for fun, they might visit the Hells, the Elemental Planes, the Astral Plane, or any one of countless other dimensions. Some, like a few of the wizards in Jack Vance’s *Rhialto The Marvellous*, may even rule over their own private dimensions.

A PLETHORA OF RACES

In contrast to Low Fantasy and Swords And Sorcery, which usually just have humans, most High Fantasy settings feature a wide variety of intelligent races. Some of the most common include dwarves, elves, gnomes, halflings, orcs, ogres, and trolls, though the nature of these beings can vary so much from world to world that all they really have in common is the name. Other, less common races include various anthropomorphic species (cat-people, lizard-people, wolf-people...), centaurs, and satyrs.

A terrible figure was coming towards them. It was far smaller than the shape they had seen from the Tower, though still much bigger than a man[.] ... It had a vulture’s head and four arms. Its beak was open and its eyes blazed. A croaking voice came from its beak. “Thou hast called me into Narnia, Rishda Tarakaan. Here I am. What hast thou to say?”

—**Rishda Tarakaan learns the price for unbelief and blasphemy when the god Tash manifests before him in *The Last Battle*, by C.S. Lewis**

“Go quickly. Summon all our people to meet me here as speedily as they can. Call out the giants and the werewolves and the spirits of those trees who are on our side. Call the Ghouls, and the Boggles, the Ogres and the Minotaurs. Call the Cruels, the Hags, the Spectres, and the people of the Toadstools. We will fight.”

—**the White Witch calls up her armies in *The Lion, The Witch, And The Wardrobe*, by C.S. Lewis**

A cruciform shape stood in the middle of the temple. They moved around it in wonder, but from whatever angle they regarded it, it retained the same perspective. It was a shimmering silver in the cool darkness of the temple and through it, as through a window, they could see a part of a landscape.

Arkyn’s voice came from behind them. “There is the entrance to Xiombarg’s plane.”
—**Corum, Jhary, and Rhalina prepare to journey to the dimension of Xiombarg of Chaos in *The Queen Of The Swords*, by Michael Moorcock**

THE PERSPECTIVE IS...

Neutral, though often tilted at least a little in the heroes’ favor. The characters survive and thrive because they’re powerful, and use their power to acquire more power, obtain riches, and/or make themselves secure.

LOW FANTASY

Low Fantasy is the opposite of High Fantasy. Unlike most Fantasy, which has magic as a strong element, Low Fantasy stories and settings feature very little magic — sometimes none at all. If magic does exist, it's usually difficult to cast (it's hard to learn, or tires the user out), relatively low-powered, and quite rare. In some worlds, such as Middle-earth, magic may suffuse the setting, but in such subtle or indirect ways that characters have little (if any) control over it. The “Deryni” novels of Katherine Kurtz depict a world with just about as much magic as a setting can have and still remain “Low Fantasy.”

The protagonists of Low Fantasy stories tend to be warriors, rogues, and the like (though it's certainly possible for the protagonist to be a rare example of someone who can use magic). Their adversaries and opponents are often similarly mundane: city guards, the king's soldiers, political rivals, or the like — instead of hordes of orcs, an evil wizard, or a rampaging dragon.

In addition to Kurtz's Deryni stories, examples of Low Fantasy include most of the novels of Guy Gavriel Kay, the tales of the Three Musketeers and other “swashbuckling” heroes, *The Deepest Sea* by Charles Barnitz, Keith Taylor's “Bard” series, George R. R. Martin's *Song Of Ice And Fire* series, Gene Wolfe's *Book Of The New Sun*, John Morressy's *Iron Angel* trilogy, and the movie *The Thirteenth Warrior*.

LOW FANTASY ELEMENTS

“No! I won't be bled.” Rhys Michael whispered, sitting up in alarm. “And I don't want cautery. I'm making good progress. Just give me time.”

—the king, desperately hoping to save his badly-injured hand, tries to stave off dangerous medical procedures in *The Bastard Prince*, by Katherine Kurtz

It is A.D. 792, a time of violent uncertainty. In Ireland, the Cross of Jesus vies with Thor's Hammer, the new ways of the Church clash with ancient beliefs. Bran Snorrison, carver of runes and composer of verse in the Viking town of Clontarf, has fallen in love with the village beauty and sets off on a journey to prove his worth in gold. But the fates have much more in store for him[....]

—from the back cover text of *The Deepest Sea*, by Charles Barnitz

“I've hired you to help me start a war. It's a prestigious line of work, with a long and glorious tradition.”

—Vizzini once again explains things to Fezzik and Inigo in the movie *The Princess Bride*

In addition to the absence or relative lack of magic, the following conventions tend to define most Low Fantasy worlds:

GRIM AND GRITTY

Many Low Fantasy campaigns and stories have a grim, gritty feel compared to the wonders and unfettered imagination of Epic and High Fantasy. Characters have to cope with such mundane details as where to sleep at night, how to deal with severe injuries (especially since the cure may be no better, or even worse!), surviving in the wilderness, lack of food and funds, assassins, and even disease.

HISTORICAL ADVENTURE

Since there's no magic to speak of in the real world (unfortunately), some Low Fantasy stories are also historical sagas as well. They usually take place in medieval or Renaissance Europe, though adventures set in other places (China, Japan, Africa, India...) at comparative periods of cultural development are just as exciting (and more exotic).

PATRIOTISM

Lacking the power to stand on their own against any threat, or to treat kings as equals, characters in Low Fantasy often serve some cause. Typically they're devoted to a country or its ruler (or perhaps the *true* ruler who's trying to overthrow the current usurper), but they could also serve a temple/priesthood or just about any other large institution capable of inspiring loyalty.

POLITICS AND WARFARE

Many Low Fantasy stories, including the Deryni novels and the *Song Of Ice And Fire* series, focus to great effect on politics and war. In this sort of story, the characters tend to be high-ranking nobles, even royals, whose adventures revolve not around personal quests or treasure-gathering but on maintaining the security and power of their realm in the face of an aggressive, even ruthless enemy. Elements of religious conflict, economic warfare, espionage, and forced marriage may also factor in.

ROMANCE

Low Fantasy stories often concentrate on the heroes' feelings and beliefs to a greater extent than Epic or High Fantasy. This includes an emphasis on romantic entanglements both potential and existing. The pursuit of love, or the efforts to rescue one's true love, drive many tales.

SWASHBUCKLING

Some types of Low Fantasy campaigns and stories feature the swashbuckling action associated with the Three Musketeers and Errol Flynn. Rapier duels between fierce rivals occur frequently, chandeliers are used for swinging across rooms as well as lighting them, and a derring-do attitude, quick wit, and courtly manners are almost as important as a sharp blade. This may be at odds with the “realistic” feel of some Low Fantasy settings, but it suits others marvelously.

THE PERSPECTIVE IS...

Neutral, even dangerous, in most cases, though verging into the “subtly beneficent” of Epic Fantasy in the case of swashbuckling stories. In most settings, the characters survive because they’re tough, clever, and skilled, though the world isn’t necessarily as hostile to them as in *Swords And Sorcery*.

Inigo Montoya: You are using Bonetti's Defense against me, eh?

The Man in Black: I thought it fitting considering the rocky terrain.

Inigo: Naturally, you must expect me to attack with Capa Ferro?

MiB: Naturally... but I find that Thibault cancels out Capa Ferro. Don't you?

Inigo: Unless the enemy has studied his Agrippa... which I have.

—**Inigo Montoya and the Man in Black (Westley) banter during a skillful duel with rapiers in the movie *The Princess Bride***

SWORDS AND SORcery

Also known as “heroic fantasy” in the parlance of many publishers, *Swords And Sorcery* is an action-adventure-oriented sort of Fantasy that focuses primarily on warriors (and to a lesser extent on roguish characters). The sword-wielding hero fights terrible monsters, rescues helpless maidens, and thwarts evil plots. In the best *Swords And Sorcery* tales, such as Howard’s Conan stories, the hero relies on speed, stamina, wits, and skill as much as on muscles; poorer works emphasize brawn and brute force over everything else. Coupled with his warrior’s skills the hero often has his refusal to become corrupted by the “softness” of more civilized life, which gives him an edge over more effete city folk and soldiers.

The *Swords And Sorcery* emphasis on action, combat, treasure, and danger suits many roleplaying game campaigns well (not surprising, given the strong influence of the likes of Howard and Leiber on Fantasy roleplaying generally). While the character types available for play sometimes seem a little restrictive compared to High or Epic Fantasy, most GMs bend the rules of the subgenre slightly to allow for more gaming-friendly spellcasting.

Examples of *Swords And Sorcery* Fantasy include Robert E. Howard’s Conan stories (and much of the rest of Howard’s Fantasy tales), Michael Moorcock’s stories about Elric of Melniboné and Corum, Clark Ashton Smith’s pulp Fantasy fiction, C.L. Moore’s “Jirel of Joiry” tales, Fritz Leiber’s stories of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, Gardner F. Fox’s stories about swordsmen like Kothar, Kyrik, and Niall of the Far Travels, Karl Edward Wagner’s fiction featuring the enigmatic swordsman Kane, and many others.

SWORDS AND SORcery ELEMENTS

In addition to the emphasis on swordplay and action-adventure, the following conventions tend to define *Swords And Sorcery* worlds:

BARBARISM

Explicitly stated in the sidebar quote, and implied by many other stories, this theme underlies much of *Swords And Sorcery* fiction. The premise is that civilization tends to weaken men, making them soft, and thus easy prey for the next barbarian invasion. Of course, “barbarian” doesn’t mean “stupid.” While Fantasy barbarians are often depicted as violent, loincloth-wearing louts, the best of the breed (such as Conan and Kull) are clever, even crafty, and over time often become a little more sophisticated than the term “barbarian” implies. Kull, after all, was King of Valusia, and Conan the ruler of Aquilonia — and few kings rule by strength of arm alone.

“Barbarism is the natural state of mankind,” the borderer said, still staring somberly at the Cimmerian. “Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph.”

—**a forester philosophizes to Conan in “Beyond The Black River,”**
by Robert E. Howard

“Again we meet, wizard!” he grinned savagely.

“Keep off!” screamed Tsotha like a blood-mad jackal. “I’ll blast the flesh from your bones! ... I am Tsotha, son of —”

Conan rushed, sword gleaming, eyes slits of wariness. Tsotha’s right hand came back and forward and the king ducked quickly. Something passed by his helmeted head and exploded behind him, searing the very sands with a flash of bellish fire. ... Conan’s sword sheared through Tsotha’s lean neck. The wizard’s head shot from his shoulders on an arching fount of blood, and the robed figure staggered and crumpled drunkenly.

—Conan slays the sorcerer Tsotha before Tsotha can bring all of his magic to bear in “The Scarlet Citadel,” by Robert E. Howard

“Let him wait until we get to camp. It’s only ten miles. If he’s fit to live in the desert he’ll live that long without a drink.”

—Olgerd Vladislav wants to test Conan’s toughness even further after rescuing him from several days of being crucified in the desert in “A Witch Shall Be Born,” by Robert E. Howard

Unfathomable wealth lay before the eyes of the gaping pirates; diamonds, rubies, bloodstones, sapphires, turquoises, moonstones, opals, emeralds, amethysts, unknown gems that shone like the eyes of evil women. The crypt was filled to the brim with bright stones that the morning sun struck into lambent flame.

—Conan, Bêlit, and her pirates find wealth undreamed of in “The Queen Of The Black Coast,” by Robert E. Howard.

MAGIC, SLOW AND DIFFICULT

Swords And Sorcery occupies something of a middle ground between Low and High Fantasy. Magic exists (hence the “And Sorcery” part), but in most cases it’s difficult to use, slow, or otherwise “restricted” compared to the spells and powers of High Fantasy. A guy with a sword usually beats a guy with a spell, cutting him down before he has a chance to complete his incantations. What magic does exist often involves a curse, or the conjuration of some demonic servant the hero has to fight.

The main exception to this rule are stories, such as Moorcock’s tales of Elric, Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Lythande stories, or Lin Carter’s *Kellory The Warlock*, where the protagonist himself wields magic. In that case, magical forces and foes become more potent. However, magic still usually remains slow and difficult — it’s not often the “combat spellcasting” common to many Fantasy roleplaying games or computer games. Elric, for example, usually has to spend a long time invoking the aid of some patron deity, demon, or being; he can’t just blast his enemies with a bolt of lightning from his fingertips. Kellory *can* blast his foes with lightning, but using that much power may debilitate him.

Another exception is major villains, who can have magic far in excess of what the protagonist possesses. Swords And Sorcery characters often confront powerful Evil spellcasters who have attained vast arcane powers through various unsavory means — worshipping dark gods, performing human sacrifice, selling their souls, and the like.

LACK OF HEROISM

In Swords And Sorcery, it’s a character’s ability to survive in a hostile world that makes him a hero, not his attitude or his conduct. Indeed, many Swords And Sorcery characters are outright mercenary or decidedly amoral — they care about money, personal comfort, power, and other such things, casting nobility, honesty, and morality by the wayside as necessary.

Or at least that’s *outwardly* the case. When push comes to shove, the truth is that most of the time, they’ll “do the right thing,” because a truly amoral person doesn’t make for a very enjoyable protagonist. Many’s the time a hero like Conan chooses to give up a fortune in gold and gems just to rescue a maiden in distress, for example.

ONLY THE TOUGH SURVIVE

If you’re not tough, you’re dead. If you can’t fight, you’re dead. This ties in with the “Barbarism” theme above; the two conventions complement each other nicely. In a gaming context, “toughness” and “fighting” don’t necessarily have to mean physical prowess; a wily thief who’s good at throwing daggers and backstabbing is as skilled a fighter, in his own way, as the sword-swinging warrior.

PERSONAL DANGERS AND SHORT-TERM THINKING

In Epic and High Fantasy, the fate of the world is often at stake. Not so in Swords And Sorcery. Characters in Swords And Sorcery stories generally don’t go on lengthy quests or have long-term goals. They live in the here and now. They want treasure, good food, beautiful women, and to revel in battle — and if the chance to obtain them doesn’t arise on its own, they’ll find a way to make their own opportunities. Similarly, the dangers they face are immediate ones of threat to life and limb, or the conquest of the city or castle they’re occupying, not long-range perils like the Dark Lord taking over the world.

SHOW ME THE MONEY... BUT DON’T LET ME KEEP IT

In many, if not most, Swords And Sorcery tales, acquiring treasure or loot is one of the hero’s most prominent motivating factors. It’s hard to imagine Conan or Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser without some sack of gems or bejewelled bauble to try for. Descriptions of staggering amounts of wealth occur in many Swords And Sorcery stories...

...though inevitably, something prevents the hero from obtaining more than a fraction of the treasure. Maybe a monster or curse drives him away from it, or he doesn’t have the means or time to cart it all away, or he abandons it in favor of something else he prefers (like rescuing a hapless maiden), or it’s soon stolen from him. In dramatic terms, letting a hero have huge amounts of money removes his incentive to go adventuring; Swords And Sorcery authors, realizing this, don’t let their characters get rich.

THE PERSPECTIVE IS...

Neutral. Heroes survive through toughness, skill, and wits, not because the world tilts in their favor.

URBAN FANTASY

Sometimes known as “modern Fantasy,” *Urban Fantasy* mixes modern-day, real world settings with magic and other Fantasy tropes. It does this to varying degrees. In some settings, magic is in the open and well-known, making it a force to be reckoned with in society — and perhaps even a force that changes society irrevocably.

More commonly, *Urban Fantasy* features a “hidden history” — a secret, underground, and/or behind-the-scenes community of spellcasters and fantastic creatures most people remain completely oblivious to. In many cases they have influenced or altered history in ways the common man remains unaware of. The magic is usually relatively low-powered, and often flavorful; it may not even be overt. The hero often gets involved in some conflict between the forces of good and evil, or has to find a way to use magic to correct some societal problem. In more espionage-oriented stories, the government may know about mystic powers, and even have a secret agency devoted to countering arcane threats.

Part of the difficulty for an *Urban Fantasy* author is explaining the nature of magic in the modern-day, technological world. Has magic always existed, or did it go away and return (and if the latter, how recently and with what effects)? Can magic and technology work together, or are they anathema to each other? Does everyone know about magic, or only some people (and what about the government)? Does magic “protect” itself, making it hard for ordinary people to perceive or remember? Can fantastic creatures interact with normal society?

Urban Fantasy is immensely popular these days. Examples of it include many of the novels and short stories of Charles deLint, Tim Powers, and Simon Hawke, Jim Butcher’s “Harry Dresden” novels, and some of Lord Dunsany’s short stories and Aaron Allston’s “Doc Sidhe” pulp-Crossworlds/*Urban Fantasy* novels. In other media, the *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* television show and “World of Darkness” series of roleplaying games from White Wolf Game Studios represent interesting perspectives on the subgenre.

For a much more extensive look at *Urban Fantasy* and its elements, please see my book *Urban Fantasy Hero*, available from Hero Games at www.herogames.com.

URBAN FANTASY ELEMENTS

In addition to the modern-day setting, the following conventions tend to define *Urban Fantasy* worlds:

FAIRY FOLK

Regardless of where the author sets them, *Urban Fantasy* stories often include Celtic/Northern European-style fairy folk — everything from small winged Victorian fairies, to proud elfish lords, to trolls and goblins. Depending on their predilections, these creatures may be helpful, malicious, or mischievous, but one thing’s for sure: they always bring adventure and excitement with them.

Most people in the gambling business thought Siegel was a megalomaniac to build a grossly expensive luxury hotel and casino in the desert seven miles south of Las Vegas — but Leon, to his alarm, saw the purpose behind the castle.

Gambling had been legalized in Nevada in 1931, the same year that work was begun on Hoover Dam, and by 1935 the dam was completed, and Lake Mead, the largest man-made body of water in the world, had filled the deep valleys behind it. ... The Flamingo, as Siegel named his hotel, was a castle in the wasteland with a lot of tamed water nearby.

And the Flamingo was almost insanely grand, with transplanted palms and thick marble walls and expensive paneling and a gigantic pool and an individual sewer line for each of its ninety-two rooms — but Leon understood that it was a totem of its founder, and therefore had to be as physically perfect as the founder.

Leon now knew why Siegel had stolen the Tower card: based on the Tower of Babel, it symbolized foolishly prideful ambition, but it was not only a warning against such a potentially bankrupt course but also a means to it. And if it were reversed, displayed upside-down, it was somewhat qualified; the doomful aspects of it were a little more remote.

Reversed, it could permit a King to build an intimidating castle, and keep it.

—Georges Leon contemplates the secret history of Las Vegas in *Last Call*, by Tim Powers

“You have seen one of them, one of their forms. That is what seeks dominion over every natural thing in this place. We of the Seelie Court are capricious, and not always well-disposed toward humankind. But would you hand this city over to the likes of what you saw tonight? That is the Unseelie Court. If we fall, every park, every boulevard tree, every grassy lawn would be their dwelling place.”

—Phouka explains the facts of life to Eddi McCandry in *Emma Bull’s War For The Oaks*

The sky was full of broomsticks and the police were going nuts trying to handle the traffic. ... I edged my battered pre-war Chevy past a huge 200-dragonpower Lincoln with sky-blue handle, polyethylene straw, and blating radio. It sneered at me, but I got to the vacant rack first. Dismounting, I pocketed the runekey[.]

—werewolf Steve Matuchek attends the homecoming game between Trismegistus University and Albertus Magnus University in Poul Anderson's "Operation Salamander"

"It's funny how your whole life can change because of the smallest thing. Like someone walking in through the door of your office. ... Everything still looks the same, but now I feel like the most common object has a secret history that most people can't see. The difference between them and me is, they don't even think about it."

—Charles de Lint, "If I Close My Eyes Forever"

MAGICOTECHNOLOGY

In some Urban Fantasy settings, magic and technology mix together into one seamless whole. The army has rifles that re-supply themselves with ammunition using teleportation spells, people don't plan their schedules until they consult an oracle, cybermancers surf the Internet via magic rather than computers, and wizards keep their grimoires on laptops. While decidedly different from the "hidden history" sort of Urban Fantasy, this type of setting often makes for very interesting stories.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MAGIC!

In most types of Urban Fantasy, the average person doesn't know about or believe in magic. This has two important effects. First, it keeps the world relatively "normal" and "recognizable" for the reader/gamer — unlike a world with magicotechnology, cars, trains, and society in general remain the same as what one can see out one's window. Second, and more importantly, it isolates the heroes. If only they (and the hidden "Mystic Community") can see the ghosts, talk to the fairies, and work magic, they can't simply turn to the cops when they need help.

WONDERS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Secret world-style Urban Fantasies sometimes focus not on "magic" as it's usually meant in the Fantasy sense — spells, evocations, and the like — but on what one might call the magic of daily existence. Love, a smile at the right time, or the simple joy of contemplating a flower may transform a person's life or work some other minor miracle.

THE PERSPECTIVE IS...

Usually beneficent. While things may not always work out for every character, and there's a good bit of tragedy and angst in many Urban Fantasy stories, in most cases characters emerge through trial and tribulation happier and more content than they were before. Their good hearts and sympathetic attitudes take them far in a world that often seems ignorant or uncaring. In many cases, Urban Fantasy takes a progressive/left-wing sort of perspective, depicting members of the underclass showing how truly "noble" and charitable they are in a world that shuns them.