

THOUGHTS ON GLORANTHA AND ITS FAMILY OF GAMES

By Ron Edwards, February 2020

Sometimes people ask me about *RuneQuest*, Glorantha, the Chaosium, Greg Stafford, and *HeroQuest*.

What do they ask me about? They're baffled by an apparently overstuffed setting, by the confusing range of editions and publishers, and especially by bouncing hard off the internet fandom discourse. They want to know if anything is fun, if so, what is it, and why nothing about it *looks* fun from the outside.

Why me? I think I get asked because I've written a lot about playing the games and I'm generally positive about the setting and ideas. I'm not a company insider or designated internet expert, but I'm sort of inside some of the history, and I know some of the people.

This is my best explanation, in three parts: the publication and development history, the setting as such, and the available game systems.

Chapter 1: Why all the fuss

Briefly, and probably easily attacked by people saying "actually ..."

1966 is the cited beginning of Glorantha as a fictional ancient-world, mythological setting authored by Greg Stafford as a personal endeavor and social topic.

1974-75 saw the formation of The Chaosium (the "The" was eventually dropped). Its first publications were the war/board games *White Bear and Red Moon* and *Nomad Gods*, with extensive Glorantha setting material.

1978 saw the publication of *RuneQuest*, designed by Steve Perrin and Ray Turney, including Glorantha as the example setting. It underwent minor revisions in reprintings through 1983, all of which are collectively called second edition or RQ2. One of them in 1980 was a boxed set including the booklet *Basic Role Playing* (BRP, pronounced "bee are pee," not "burp"), by Stafford and Lynn Willis. The same set was released in Europe via Games Workshop.

Glorantha developed in two different ways: in-house and user-based. The Chaosium published articles in their magazine *The Wyrms' Footnotes* as well as other zine-like publications and game supplements, including the locations Pavis and The Big Rubble by Stafford and Perrin, Stafford's *Cults of Prax* and *Cults of Terror*, and Sandy Petersen's *Trollpak*. These authors shared a counter-cultural outlook: playful, a bit adult (sexual), political, and full of puns, but also intense regarding the philosophical content. Furthermore, Stafford favored a documentarian, in-setting style, resulting in a consistent feel of "this is what so-and-so says," not "this is exactly how it is."

Simultaneously, the publishers stated or strongly implied that anything that players did with *RuneQuest* might be included as canonical setting, i.e., that role-playing, world-wide, was "really" exploring the setting. All role-playing publishing was small-press and relied on user base development for additional material, so it was attractive to regard Glorantha as singular and objective, yet developed by multiple users for mutual compatibility. Since the early published material concerns a limited geographical area and one culture's legendry, a group could informally elect itself the developer of some topic or area and set to work.

This idealized objective unity didn't really happen. Instead, as independent play and convention scenarios turned into publications, Glorantha's in-house ambiguity was amplified, because different contributors' views differed as to what would be nailed down as canon, or because some contributors enjoyed adding more ambiguity as such.

The rules system evolved independently, “outside” of Glorantha. The Chaosium promoted BRP as a generic, setting-customizable system, including licensing, soon publishing *Stormbringer*, *The Call of Cthulhu*, *Superworld*, *Questworld*, *Hawkmoon*, and *Ringworld*; as well as an open license for other companies, e.g. *Other Suns*. In Europe, BRP became a significant core system, e.g., *Drakkar och Demoner*, *Mutant*, and *Nephilim*. I mention this here to clarify that it’s a parallel phenomenon.

RuneQuest was licensed to Avalon Hill and published by them in 1984 as a boxed set of booklets with extensive system revisions, which is called third edition or RQ3. Unlike the company’s previous license to revise *White Bear and Red Moon* into *Dragon Pass* (1980), it did not emphasize Glorantha, and some of the publications reprinted previous adventure material, de-Gloranthized and set in “Fantasy Europe.” This version was published in Europe, again via Games Workshop, in 1987.

In the absence of a publisher developing the setting, centers of fandom filled the gap with zine material and informal publications. In the 1990s, the early internet revealed that the ideal of a single gelled canonical result was strained, to say the least. Several geographic communities and independent websites achieved referential status as sources of Glorantha expertise and interpretation, but decisively not one-true-setting. Significant items of contention concerned the moral role of the Lunar Empire, the presence of playful content, the real-world analogues for the fictional cultures, and, of course, varying table-uses of specific rules for combat and magic across the many publications and revisions. These differences were so contested that the fandom looked less like a hive mind and more like a nest of factions.

Avalon Hill can be counted as one faction as a new line editor republished its version of *RuneQuest* in 1993 as a single volume with a stronger focus on Glorantha. With Chaosium’s participation, this line published new Glorantha material and revised older material with the newer rules. This phase is considered part of RQ3.

Stafford himself became such a faction right when it had seemed as if canon were restored. In 1993 he published *King of Sartar*, which revised some setting concepts, and in 1994, he refused to permit Avalon Hill to publish further Glorantha material, scuttling their plans to publish *RuneQuest: Adventures in Glorantha*. This point marks the death of the ideal that “we’re all playing in and creating the same setting,” and also the beginning of splits among fandom regarding Stafford, whether he was the grandmaster of the setting or a prima donna who’d betrayed the audience. The new design was neither published nor received approval but is sometimes called 4th edition.

Chaosium underwent complicated splittings and regroupings during the next ten years, which are tedious to recount. The relevant points are that supplements for *Pendragon*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and other titles were published under license by other companies, in some cases two or more companies sequentially; and that the IPs were not easily understood from the outside. For example, the term “RuneQuest” itself underwent a confusing sequence of use. Avalon Hill developed an entirely different game to be called *RuneQuest: Slayers*, which was ultimately canceled in 1998; this property became orphaned and its authors published a free version called *RuneSlayers*, which is unrelated to *RuneQuest* in content and is not considered a version or edition.

By the late 1990s, the concept of published canon for Glorantha had lost its center as neither Avalon Hill nor Chaosium could be consulted; the former’s license expired and the latter had effectively splintered apart. The effect on the fanbase was to harden separate communities’ notions of the setting, each maintaining the ideal of an objective Glorantha which a “real” fan or player would recognize if only presented with enough proper argument.

Stafford remained committed to re-presenting Glorantha as such, including contributing to the computer game *King of Dragon Pass* (1999). In 2000, he established a new company, Issaries Inc, and published a new game for Glorantha, *Hero Wars*, with rules by Robin Laws. The game underwent several revisions, changing in name to *HeroQuest* in 2003, which had been the originally intended title, but was not available due to IP issues that cleared up in 2002.

Significantly, Isssaries Inc material presented a solution to all the content debates: that published material provided only a user's starting point for Glorantha and that from now on, every role-playing group would be playing in their **own** Glorantha as they saw fit to interpret and extend it: "YGMV," meaning, "your Glorantha may vary." HW/HQ supplemental material also reasserted the original game's Mediterranean, Babylonian, and Persian analogues.

However, many groups and cliques of the fanbase felt strongly that all Glorantha play and fandom was to be compatible (i.e., with *theirs*) and did not want published work they valued to be demoted to mere interpretation. To them, YGMV violated the promised ideal of the "true Glorantha." These arguments ran in parallel with those about the new HW/HQ game mechanics.

Groups that worked closely with Stafford included the Reaching Moon and Unspoken Word communities in the UK; the former published the magazines *Tales of the Reaching Moon* and *Wyrms' Footprints* (reprinting *Wyrms' Footnotes*). Some participants founded Moon Design Publications (MDP), which produced the later editions of *HeroQuest* and *HeroQuest Glorantha* (HQG) in 2013.

Meanwhile, more versions of *RuneQuest* were published under license. In 2006, Mongoose Publishing published *RuneQuest* under license, later nicknamed MRQ1 or sometimes called 4th edition, and in 2010, another version, *RuneQuest II*, nicknamed MRQ2, sometimes called 5th edition. In 2012, another licensor, The Design Mechanism, published *RuneQuest*, by the same authors of MRQ2, the only version explicitly identified as a numbered edition (6th).

However, this recent focus on "editions" labeling is unhelpful. The critical point for both Glorantha and *RuneQuest* is that there is no **sequence** of development tracked by that term. Instead, these are better understood as a spray of endpoints for divergent factions across four decades, and that this spray includes even more endpoints with their own preferred core texts, rules modifications, and self-authored libraries. For example, *King of Dragon Pass* was re-released for modern apps in 2011; the Design Mechanism publishes *Mythras* (2016), which is its version of *RuneQuest* with Glorantha removed; and Pelgrane Press publishes *13th Age: Glorantha* (2018), which is the Glorantha setting using a variant of d20. There are lots more that aren't traditionally published but are as playable and supported as any publication, represented by avid websites, archives of decades of discussion, centers of play culture, and zines.

Reconciliations eventually led to the terms *RuneQuest*, *HeroQuest*, and Glorantha becoming united again, and in 2013 Stafford formally granted ownership of them to Moon Design Publications. In 2015 MDP acquired majority ownership of Chaosium Inc with Stafford's and Peterson's support. They published *RuneQuest: Roleplaying in Glorantha* (RQG) in 2018, conceived as a modern update of RQ2 with influences from *Pendragon* and *HeroQuest*. So now both *RuneQuest* and *HeroQuest* are published by a single IP owner as two different but valid ways to interpret Glorantha. Both presentations emphasize the non-western-European character of the setting, and they reconsider philosophical aspects of the material going all the way back to the 1960s.

This restored unity does not, however, indicate a canonical setting or a "one true system." Chaosium Inc even drove the point home by changing the publishing-and-play concept to YGWV, "your Glorantha *will* vary." They reinforce this point through their openness to fan publications of their own interpretations, by providing PDFs of most of the prior publications, and by offering Source Reference Documents for Open Game Licenses for both *Basic Role Playing* and the *HeroQuest* system, the latter called *Questworlds*.

Chapter 2: What's so special

Here is my best shot at describing Glorantha, but fair warning, it's entirely personal, influenced by my historical contacts with the publications: by RQ2, especially the original *Cults of Terror*; by *King of Sartar*; and by the first version of *Hero Wars*. Someone else will say something completely different.

It's not the same as a "fantasy setting" as expressed in most media after the mid-1980s. It was born in 1960s-1970s fantasy and the California counter-culture: a mix of pop philosophizing, retro-pulp revival, underground comix, recreational drug use, world mythology as understood at that time, neo-shamanism, violent heroism, and playful humor. It's also not the same as a "fantasy setting" for most role-playing games, because it's not world-built. The material is offered to set one's imagination into overdrive rather than outlining and codifying things to look at.

Glorantha is an ancient period and early Dark Ages world. It has far more to do with Mesopotamia, ancient China, Hyboria, and Lankhmar than it does with medieval Europe, Le Morte d'Arthur, or the Carolingian Cycle. Its heroes are Conans, Grey Mousers, and Rustums, not Lancelots, Percivals, and Rolands.

– *RuneQuest*, 1978

It's a tough, ruthless world and age, sculpted in bronze and fire, where "cult" has its original meaning as the root of *culture*, and ways of life are sacred – yet people must leave their farms to march to war.

Once you've got the ancient-world, non-medieval naturalism, then the acid and the heavy progrock kick in. It's not a version of our world, past or future. It's not even a planet in real space. You're best off saying, "Glorantha, a magical land," and saying as well, "assume nothing," concerning familiar tropes of fantasy as genre.

So ... the land is a curving surface floating on an endless ocean. The sun crosses the sky and "dies" every night, to be reborn again, as anyone who prays for it to happen right will tell you (and be right). This has been going for just over sixteen centuries, since the Dawn of Time. Yes, time. Before that, it wasn't linear although we talk about the events in it, the Godtime, as if they were because we're not very bright.

Or take the sky's most prominent object, the Red Moon, placed directly above the crater left behind when it tore free from the ground. It doesn't rise or set or move, and although it goes through crescent-style phases, that's not because it's reflecting the sun's light, but because it really is cycling through red and black like that. It's a god, or goddess actually, and you better not forget it. Sedenya is her real name, or to those who resist the empire which it oversees, Shepelkirt, the red whore.

Or consider that the default metal throughout most of Glorantha is bronze (*hu*-metal), which unlike our version can be mined – from the bones of dead gods, if you wanted to know. Iron is by definition a magical metal, inimical to a number of ancient races, universally respected and feared (*ur*-metal), and typically only available through powerful cults.

Or take dragons, which are rare, huge, winged reptilian monsters who breathe fire, raid villages and towns, kidnap pretty people, and hoard treasure for no apparent reason. Sound familiar? Well, in Glorantha, real dragons are so huge and awesome that the world's biggest mountain ranges are formed from the skeletons of dead ones, and all the living ones do is sleep. The problem is that they're *so* powerful that their self-indulgent dreams take material form, and since real dragons are apparently good Freudians, *voilà*, guess what the dragons we have to fight are like.

Or take the fantasy "races." Elves are actually plants who happen to walk and talk, trolls' birthing and eating habits are repulsive (their word for elves means "salad") but you will love them anyway, dwarves are probably robots, ducks are cursed but lethal halfpints, and dragonewts are the wisest, eldest, and most profound elder race but also completely insane. Granted, some of the creatures are standard, e.g. the minotaurs are straight from *Dungeons & Dragons*, but not many.

So what we do in it? How do we play? That's easily divided into adventure and transcendence. For adventure, situations are vivid, full of strange imagery, odd magical backstories, and strong personalities. They are also very dangerous by most role-playing standards, and the content can be

pretty raw. Life is close to the bone in the face of the elements, constant human conflicts, and many, many monsters, plenty of whom are outright morally evil, not as designated fantasy-foes, but in real live shocking terms.

The characters to be played don't fit into familiar specialized roles. Everyone armors up, knows how to fight, and slings spells. In fact, magic is simply all around, so minor spirit interactions, casual spell use, and regular community rituals are considered unremarkable. The characters' diversity develops most through their different kinds of magic. Shamans bargain with and command the spirits all around, everywhere, and the cults provide society with structure. Cult temples and priests are highly local and community-based, channeling worship to the gods and receiving divine power.

Other forms of magic may exist, including so-called sorcery in the mysterious west, which perceives the concepts and abstractions which compose the world, phrased as veneration of saints of the Invisible God. Another possible form is mysticism, in which monks and philosophers free themselves from the world, paradoxically becoming transformative within it. Historically, great failed mystics have shaken the world more than once.

So that's how characters become specialized, as they develop their individual cult status, their most-favored skills, and their magical heft. Magical development gets more and more into the trippy side of fantasy, because it means integrating into the cults' and similar people's social roles, institutional quirks, and ideologies. Then from trippy, it gets cosmic. Once into the upper ranks of any significant cult or similar group, your magic shifts from a bank of colorful utility spells to direct contact with the runic mythology.

Runes are primal and literal expressions of the entities and principles of reality. Every god or anything like a god is represented by some combination of them – and as a hero becomes more and more significant, they achieve rune-mastery. You no longer merely power a little bonus to your sword's sharpness out of your own energy, you tap into reality and channel divine intervention. Once your magic becomes rune-driven, you are always partway on the Other Side.

The Other Side refers to contact with the Godtime before time began, which is accessible to witness and to participate in, if you take enough drugs or concentrate enough on abstruse philosophy or chant for hours with sweaty like-minded people on a holy day or kill enough people or monsters to make a difference in terms of a god's identity.

Time was born in Hell, where the shadows of chaos reigned and held sway over the heart of the universe. All of the universe was in confusion, elements blundered amidst each other, and devils ran amok, slaying and kidnapping gods and mortals alike, carrying them to the formless void. When the Lightbringers entered the Underworld and completed their great tasks, they forged a cosmic pact which bound all entities, living and dead, spiritual and physical, pure and unholy, intelligent and inert, into the Great Compromise. ...

The old deities are the source and cause of Time; the energies of this compromise provided the soul-essence of the new age. The old deities created the will of the new age and bound themselves to uphold it. The more powerful the deity, then the more numerous the commitments binding it into the world matrix, and the more effectively fossilized its role in the Time to come.

– Cults of Terror, 1981

So, now that *that's* clear as day ...

There have been three Ages since the dawn of time, each one climaxing in cataclysm. The first concerned the creation of a new god, born into human form; it ended in the Gbaji Wars which released the limits on Chaos and arguably left the entire cosmos in less stable condition. The second concerned the pinnacles of several imperial and intellectual achievements; it ended with the sinking of almost a whole continent and dragons eating, like, almost everyone in the middle of another. The third has seen another new goddess arise, Sedenya, or the Red Moon, whose home is exactly what it sounds

like; she is patron of the Lunar Empire, which is currently dominating the continent, or discovering that it cannot, depending on whom you ask.

Although ominous and mysterious conflicts are igniting across Glorantha, the flashpoint of the Hero Wars occurs in Dragon Pass, a classic geographical conundrum for the Lunar Empire which seeks access to the sea. It is rugged terrain inhabited by the Heortlings, uncooperative tribal peoples who can be beaten but not overcome. Dragon Pass is also the historical site of many important Godtime and historical phenomena, much of which is awakening in response to the war and magic currently raging there.

What the impending wars are about, mostly, is that the Lunar Way and the Red Goddess' very existence openly acknowledge Chaos as an existing force in the world, and most of the world's cultures don't like that one bit. It so happens that the Orlanthi culture of the Heortlings is especially fervent about it, and they are planted right where the Empire's leaders would like it to go. As the conflict escalates, both sides become more willing to disrupt the Godtime and the essential relationship between myth and reality to get what they want.

That's why Glorantha is doomed, at about halfway through its 17th century of existence. Soon, from the time of play, the Hero Wars will overwhelm every culture and aggressive metaphysical experimentation will literally undo the fragile Compromise. The soft implication for the outcome is that the universe will be reborn in mundane terms, the Godtime will retreat into pure myth, and the magic and heroes we've played will be legends.

But legends aren't trivial. What the new world will be like is shaped by the values and priorities that emerged during the Hero Wars. So it's not about who wins, it's about who speaks up and represents, and for what.

That's where the role-playing comes into it. Play is set at some point just before or during the Hero Wars, and player-characters typically begin as relatively ordinary people engaged in their cultures and associated religions. They gain skills, reputation, metaphysical presence, and status, even to positions of prominence, e.g., Rune Lord or Rune Priest, in the powerful network of temples and in the many available theaters of warfare. Formally or informally, they form hero bands.

A hero band promotes a magical practice (demigod, spirit, saint, whatever), a cultural group, or an idea or ideal, perhaps having found common ground across former antagonists. It's best described with the phrase *The Old World is over ...* plus an extremist mission statement of some kind, expressing goals, hopes, or foes. *The trolls must die. Love will light a new way. Burn it all down. Topple your oppressors. We will rule over the new one. It's time for the best party ever.*

Hero bands have typically arrived at some novel use of heroquesting, venturing into the Other Side to participate in mythic sagas, which feeds back onto reality. All cultures do it to some degree in ritual; you can assure good crops by recapping your tribe's origin myth, for instance. However, *manipulating* standard heroquesting is something which hero bands are beginning to get good at, and it's a big part of forging an identity in the Hero Wars.

Chapter 3: Games, systems, and stories

If you're going to play anything to do with Glorantha, it's a pretty sure bet that someone else has strong opinions about which rules to use and which setting features are in force. So instead of providing a laundry list of titles and rules details as if you were choosing, I'll try to describe what you need to know, depending on what their preferences have landed you with.

These questions apply no matter what system is being used, and they're easily asked and answered. Some of the texts have ways to nail down the answers and others don't.

- Where will play begin? Is the location mapped and culturally described, or is it to be developed through the act of play?
- In either case, is anything happening there relative to the crisis points of the overall setting? In other words, are we playing to get into the Hero Wars or to stay away from them?
- When will play begin, in the rough timeline for Glorantha? Are the Hero Wars on the horizon or in full swing, and is a “future timeline” in force as we proceed through play?

The next general questions are about “what do we do,” and the organizing person may think of the answers as given or obvious. You can ask practical things that raise the topics.

- How much do we have to know about the politics and mythology? Are we supposed to be proactive about them?
- Are we a “party?” Can individual priorities lead to separate activities, or even to conflicts?
- Is this to be enemies-based – are there bad guys and appropriate goals: “against the Lunars!” “against Chaos!” or is the adversity left up to the events of play and how we get along?
- What is the mix of seriousness and playfulness? Is it OK to get a bit personally committed to the philosophical questions, or is that too intense? Is it OK to bring in joke names like the original writers did (“Naimless,” “Delecti”), or is that too silly?

The last general questions border on a critique of play, and the organizing person may not want to assess their own views, or they may even perceive the topics as hostile. So I suggest keeping them to yourself, knowing that they matter, and then play in accord with the answers as you discover them.

- What are the cultural analogues? Bluntly, how white is it? Equally bluntly, how “adult” explicit is it?
- Are we seeking the objective Glorantha, or is this YGMV?
- What is our degree of agency? Is there a planned arc we’re going to follow, or are we shaping our own political and metaphysical role in the onset of the Hero Wars?

RuneQuest sensu lato

“What play is about” focuses on individual improvement. Historically, most of the attention is on “how we rose up to become heroes,” usually from young or somewhat undeveloped status in a designated spot. You concentrate on survival and ultimately on self-definition, which depends on whatever skills and attributes you use the most, and on advancing socially and magically. The hero band is left as an abstract concept for late-stage play and isn’t mechanically expressed beyond the historical concept of the adventuring party.

The guiding principle for *RuneQuest* mechanics is physical representation. For example, an axe’s game mechanics represent it as a “chunk” of the fiction. It does X damage because it is this big and this sharp, with this kind of edge. If you hand your axe to someone else, they will use it with their own weapon skills and damage bonuses, but the axe’s damage dice and other properties transfer over to them with the axe. Some mechanics are bit more abstracted than some games, but still, any numbers and dice in the game signify similar “chunks” in the imagined world, rated in size, weight, time, durability, intensity, or similar. Therefore the rules are compartmentalized to account for different chunks working in different ways: types of weapons, types of character backgrounds, types of magic, et cetera.

Two subroutines especially stand out in the original game. The combat mechanics – timing, movement, weapon reach, attribute bonuses – are so coherent that they almost play themselves, and are famous for their clinical brutality. Players swiftly learn not to swagger into fights expecting to shrug off mook attacks, but instead to choose exactly whom they will risk fighting, and why. Spirit magic, or shamanism, is interactive and highly situational, nuanced by different stages of one’s training, different kinds of spirits, different kinds of obligations or deals, storage or exchange of

magical power, and the social context of one's practice. In both, the resulting play-experience is immediate and visceral, because every action and detail affects every roll, down to the fictional second.

The individual cult mechanics are similarly developed through the game supplements and editions to almost Talmudic intensity and detail. They are effectively "leveling up," in proceeding from layman to initiate status, and every cult has its own sub-routines of game mechanics and social obligations. Further, if a character achieves Rune Lord or Rune Priest status, rune mastery operates on a different profile of game mechanics. If more than one does so, especially if they belong to different cults, then the group is playing a different game.

Heroquesting, by contrast, is not directly supported by most *RuneQuest* rules, and is often left to abstract or epilogue-style play. The Hero Wars' weird magic-breaking magic is house-ruled or conceived as a future topic, out of play.

Given the title's long history, some of the publications' differences are too big to pass over.

- The skill lists vary in length and complexity, as well as how skills were distributed to starting characters.
- Sorcery is introduced in several different ways and in some cases revised through new texts.
- The titular runes may either be non-mechanics symbols or character-based, dice-rated traits and personality.
- Voluntary and involuntary behavioral mechanics have been imported from *Pendragon* in recent versions, for perhaps the most significant historical shift in how to play.
- You will find significantly different views of Chaos and the Lunar Empire, presented as objective.
- Characters' starting social status, tied to tribal or other cultural identity, ranges from abstract to very specific.

In *RuneQuest*, whatever happens, and whatever becomes of your character, it will be a unique, personal, and above all *caused* journey, dependent on precise decisions and the precise outcomes of the mechanics. You can truly say your character is your own.

HeroQuest sensu lato

"What play is about" focuses on getting things done. It requires situations caught in the rising arcs of conflicts and their heavy consequences. Any crisis will do: community, environmental, military, social, or magical.

Play begins strongly focused on a given location and whatever it may be experiencing based on the inhabitants and the current state of the Hero Wars, which are well under way. Since you know you're supposed to be a group, characters may begin at any point on the spectrum from homogeneous to diverse. The attention is less on "how we met" and more on "what do we as heroes do," with any run-up being decidedly contextual, and with character improvement spinning rapidly up from the events of play.

The guiding principle for *HeroQuest* mechanics is the contest, held at a point where a situation can go very badly for someone. A contest's scope can be adjusted in different ways, to be single-roll or lots of rolls, or its effects can be all-or-nothing or nuanced per participant, or its scale of effect can vary in size and time. Resolving contests makes situations change, with all the fallout you can imagine – "nothing happens" doesn't happen.

There's only one game mechanic, the ability, which applies to any listed thing on the sheet: physical or mental attributes, broad or narrow skill categories, details of appearance, knowledge, cultural or species features, items and objects, relationships to people (or whatever) and communities, or

anything else. There are no or very few standard abilities, so two characters' sheets may be composed of almost completely different words.

A given ability's rating isn't physically representational, but rather about how something impacts what's happening. If you have "Axe" on your sheet, then its rating isn't for the axe but rather for how you kill or threaten someone with it. Putting the same axe in someone else's hands doesn't transfer any numbers to them – what they get out of using it is up to whatever's on their own sheet.

Here's a useful contrast: in *RuneQuest*, the Size attribute is literally volume and mass – if you have a 15 and that guy has a 12, you're taller and heavier. Whereas in *HeroQuest*, if you have an ability called "Big," then you're definitely a big person, but the precise number only determines how well you knock someone else off balance, or block a narrow way, or anything else that being big might do. If two characters or entities have "Big" at the same value, they don't have to be the same physical size; or if they do happen to be the same physical size, they don't have to have the same value for "Big."

Abilities may also be loosely defined to start, achieving more definition through play, especially for relationships and for magic. Relationships permit a sort of "multi person" character sheet, to the point that a group of player-characters may represent a couple of dozen people or entities, centered on the original. Magical abilities are not compartmentalized or given special properties by the system, but rather by their runic associations with whatever contest is occurring. Magical contests can be quite surreal, especially since Other Side rituals are part of ordinary play and proactive heroquesting rules are available from the start instead of waiting for highest power levels

The flexible, discoverable meanings for the abilities do not indicate talky, diceless play. The dice matter a great deal in contests' outcomes, and even the Hero Points which modify rolls are governed by a supply-constraint that influence outcomes rather than replacing them. Failures are unforgiving. The chance to be, for instance, decapitated in a fight against a formidable opponent is not perceivably different from the chance in *RuneQuest*. Since contests are often about more than merely injuries, an outcome might result in the massacre of your village or even the destruction of your cherished god.

The title underwent extensive revisions in a comparatively short time, so depending on the version:

- The basic contest mechanic is the same throughout, but the subroutines for Extended Contests (multiple rolls, widely varying individual outcomes) differ quite a lot.
- Each text provides different starting options for cultures and character construction within them.
- Long-term management of play varies from entirely open-ended to a management mechanic called the pass-fail cycle.
- At least one version includes long-term social outcomes, e.g. for communities, and a formal scenario to scenario dramatic structure.

In *HeroQuest*, whatever happens, it wasn't railroaded. The web of social, physical, and magical confrontations grows out of play, rather than planning, and their outcomes cannot be controlled. There's a reason the distinctive player role is called the Narrator rather than the Game Master. This is one of the few game systems in which you could make and experience something as passionate and grand as *The Iliad* or *The Lord of the Rings* without it being a meticulously planned campaign.

Conclusion: Last thoughts, I guess

In a casual, personal conversation, I can tell when we've communicated. Also, the other person can provide the right avenues for discussion, depending on what interests them, and also let me know when we need to explore something else. Here, there's no way for me to know whether I've made any sense. In the hope of maybe some success, here are the "so what" summaries for each section.

You can respect your own choice or situation for how you're playing, or more crudely, don't let anyone push you around. Fan loyalty to names, publishers, books, or setting concepts can be left at the door, because no one owns playing in Glorantha, and there's no authoritative single text. This is not about the real setting or the right one or the only one.

Please feel encouraged to find the ways that Gloranthan content inspires you, which are completely your own. I offered my summary only as an example. Start with anything that strikes you as the most dramatic or scary or fun, then pick up references as you see fit, and don't treat any of them as required instructions.

I have enough play-experience to reassure you that any of the available rules will work, as they have benefited from some of the best good faith effort that ever went into RPG design. Each set has holes, yes, but each is strong enough for you to extrapolate to fill them. Collectively, they favor motivated play, "on purpose," rather than carrying out designated roles or assigned missions.

Thanks to Jeff Richard and Ian Cooper of the Chaosium, Nick Brooke, Moreno Roncucci, and to participants in the Facebook RuneQuest group for critique and fact-checking. Any errors or misunderstandings are mine.