

The Fortress



of Woe

By Jason Morningstar

INTRODUCTION

I'm going to take you on a journey of the imagination – to a strange and desolate place. A wind-scoured plain where no living thing crawls or keens. There, in the distance! A half-tumbled ruin, a once-mighty keep long since abandoned to nature ... and things more horrible than nature. Shrouded in fog, as if to challenge all comers. Woe be unto any adventurer foolish enough to stride though its long-dead portcullis. Woe be unto they who would seek out the treasures buried beneath this fortress - the Fortress of Woe!

The Fortress of Woe is a roleplaying game about playing a roleplaying game. In The Fortress of Woe, you and your friends will create characters who are players – imaginary people who will, in turn, create characters who will plumb the depths of the Fortress of Woe. Your character, therefore, is a perfectly ordinary gamer who has a character of their own. One of you will play the group's Game Master.

Terminology

When I refer to players, I mean you and your friends. You guys rock!

When I refer to characters, I mean the imaginary people you create to play Castle of Woe. Like “Gerome Funk, middle manager at Grampus Investments” or “Lily Cornwallis, high school math nerd”.

When I refer to adventurers, I mean the imaginary people (and elves, and dwarves) created by your characters to explore the actual dungeons beneath the Fortress of Woe, slaying monsters and finding treasure. Like “Lord Zann, warrior of the Weeping Sword” or “Shayna Star-bow, Elven maiden”.

What You'll Need to Play

Character sheets, which also include adventurer sheets.
Some pencils and six-sided dice.

Choosing Your Fortress

The craggy, mysterious, deadly Fortress of Woe to be explored by your adventurers is a mirror to some real-world place for your characters. That place will be a focal point for your game, so choose it as a group. It should be a place that all the characters have a strong connection to and reason to interact with – they

don't have to actually play there, but it should loom large in all their minds and provide all sorts of difficulties for them. Here are some suggestions:

A business. Grampus Investments corporate headquarters could be the Fortress of Woe for a group of miserable employees, for example. So could a grocery store or a military base.

A school. The iconic choice, the Fortress of Woe could be a high school or college. A boarding school? A math and science magnet program? An ivy-league business school? All fun possibilities. So is a bog-standard suburban high school.

Further afield. Perhaps the Fortress of Woe is a group home for juvenile offenders. Maybe it's a church camp or a homeless shelter. How about a lunar base? Whatever works for you and your friends.

MAKING A CHARACTER

Once you've settled on a general situation for the characters, you can flesh them out and make them unique individuals. You should hash out your ideas for characters as a group, and try not to overlap too much.

Your Character's Issue

Every character has a single issue. It should be a negative, direct and evocative, easy to create drama and tension around. "Vain" is acceptable, but "Doesn't realize her power over others" is better. "Poor" is OK, but "Working two jobs to stay in night school" is better. Make the issue something you think everyone will have fun addressing in play.

Your Character's Traits

Characters and adventurers both have a set of four traits that indicate how good they are at handling various challenges. The traits are the same in the character's world and the adventurer's world, but numeric scores will be different.

You have four numbers to assign to the four traits for your character: Four, six, eight, and ten. Put the ten in the trait your character would be excellent at, and the four in the trait your character would uniformly suck at. It's a good idea for everybody to "claim" a trait they'd like to be the best in, so that characters can be broadly differentiated.

Vitality is a measure of strength, agility, and all sorts of physical skill. Lifting heavy things, wiggling through narrow spaces, and running for your life all require Vitality. A ten in Vitality means that your character or adventurer is extremely athletic and physically fit. A four in Vitality signals frailty, sickness, or lack of fitness.

Charm is a measure of social grace, sex appeal, and general likeability. Convincing someone to help you (or leave you alone) or soothing an angry person (or monster) require Charm. A ten in Charm means your character or adventurer is sexy, popular, and adept at manipulating people. A four in charm means the opposite – someone who is socially maladroit or generally horrible to be around.

Cunning is a measure of cleverness, alertness, and instinct. Solving a puzzle requires Cunning – and so does hiding from a guard (be it a night watchman or a troll). A ten in Cunning means that your character or adventurer is observant and full of tricks. A four in Cunning suggests a clueless or foolish person, or someone self-absorbed to the point of recklessness.

Knowledge is a measure of book-learning, understanding, and all sorts of mental skill. You need Knowledge to research the answer to a riddle, to negotiate a bureaucracy, or to remember how to hurl a fireball. A ten in Knowledge means your character or adventurer is stuffed with useful information on any conceivable topic. A four in Knowledge hints at general stupidity, or profound ignorance – perhaps the character is somebody's younger sibling.

Example

Autumn is making a character for *The Fortress of Woe*. Her and her friends have already decided the Fortress is a metaphor for Watauga high school, and she creates Shawnee Stevens, a beautiful girl who is the reigning queen of the drama club. Shawnee has Charm ten (of course), Cunning eight, Vitality six, and Knowledge four. She's not the sharpest tool in the shed, but she gets by on dazzling beauty and a scheming, manipulative nature.

Making Your Adventurer

Once you've created your character, creating an adventurer for them to play exploring the Fortress of Woe is easy – just reverse the traits. If your character has a Vitality of ten, the adventurer has a Vitality of four. The high and low traits will determine which sort of adventurer your character will play. Adventurer's

don't have issues.

One player must play the Game Master, and this player's character doesn't create an adventurer – they create a whole world of adventure instead!

The Adventurer Classes

The DWARF (Vitality 10, Charm 4)
Can detect traps at 10.

The WARRIOR (Vitality 10, Cunning 4)
Can absorb massive damage – has Vitality times two Hit Points.

The BARBARIAN (Vitality 10, Knowledge 4)
Can fight two opponents at once.

The WIZARD (Knowledge 10, Vitality 4)
Can cast three combat spells per day.

The NECROMANCER (Knowledge 10, Charm 4)
Can raise the dead once per day.

The HOLY MAN (Knowledge 10, Cunning 4)
Can cast three healing spells per day.

The ASSASSIN (Cunning 10, Knowledge 4)
Can strike from the shadows at 10.

The RANGER (Cunning 10, Charm 4)
Can use a bow as a ranged attack at 10.

The THIEF (Cunning 10, Vitality 4)
Can disarm traps.

The PALADIN (Charm 10, Knowledge 4)
Can repel undead horrors.

The ELF (Charm 10, Cunning 4)
Can communicate with animals.

The TROUBADOR (Charm 10, Vitality 4)
Can attract followers.

The Mirror

Some people insist on playing an alter ego of themselves. If your character is this sort, go ahead and mirror their traits – their adventurer will be have the same highs and lows that they do.

Hit Points

To round them out, adventurers have hit points equal to their Vitality.

Example

Autumn's character, Shawnee Stevens, is going to play an adventurer with Knowledge ten, Vitality eight, Cunning six, and Charm four – sounds like a necromancer. But Autumn decides that Shawnee, being vain, glorious, and vain-glorious, is going to play a character who is a mirror of herself, which makes her a paladin! Autumn names Shawnee's adventurer Shanita Darkwave.

THE GAME MASTER

The person playing the Game Master has a unique dual role. The Game Master character will be involved in various scenes along with his friends as an equal participant. The player, as the GM character, will also be responsible for actually running other character's through *The Fortress of Woe*. The Game Master's traits will determine what sort of adventure will be run.

The Adventures

The ANT QUEEN'S DEATH TRAP (Vitality 10, Charm 4)

The HELL PIT OF NARGALOTH (Vitality 10, Cunning 4)

The CAVERN OF UTTER DOOM (Vitality 10, Knowledge 4)

The PUZZLE MAZE OF MERLOCK (Knowledge 10, Vitality 4)

The TROLL'S TREASURE CAVE (Knowledge 10, Charm 4)

The DUNGEON OF SORROW (Knowledge 10, Cunning 4)

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The MAD WIZARD'S TOWER (Cunning 10, Knowledge 4)

The TRAPPED TOMB OF THUNDERFIST (Cunning 10, Charm 4)

The GOBLIN'S LAIR (Cunning 10, Vitality 4)

The SECRET TEMPLE (Charm 10, Knowledge 4)

The THRONE ROOM OF THE ANCIENT KING (Charm 10, Cunning 4)

The SKY CITY OF RAMBU (Charm 10, Vitality 4)

SEQUENCE OF PLAY

The Fortress of Woe is designed to be played as a series of related scenes that comment on and amplify each other. The first scene of every session always takes place in the everyday world of the characters, and should involve some personal challenge for a character or the group. After this is resolved, a scene is immediately started in the world of the adventurers, as the Game Master narrates some strangely familiar deadly challenge for the daring explorers to face. This scene must echo the previous scene in some way. This process is repeated, and the back-and-forth movement toward some satisfying conclusion constitutes a session of play.

Anyone can propose a scene for the characters as a group, or another player's character specifically.

The player playing the Game Master crafts scenes for the adventurers in The Fortress of Woe.

Example

Play begins with the characters poking around Watauga High after dark, thanks to an auditorium door Shawnee left propped open. They are looking for a place to play The Fortress of Woe in secret. During their explorations they are discovered by the security guard, who chases them out.

In the next scene, the adventurers are exploring the Dungeon of Sorrow (Jacky Crisp, the Game Master, is a bookish nerd with a Knowledge of 10 and a Cunning of 4). Steve, playing Jacky, describes a scene in which the adventurers are

faced with a rampaging troll they must flee.

The following scene would take place in the world of the characters, and introduce some new element. This cycle is then repeated.

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Once a conflict has been outlined, determine which trait applies. It's entirely possible that two or more traits might be applicable, depending on the approach.

Roll two six-sided dice and add the total together. If the result is equal to or less than the applicable trait, the character or adventurer succeeds. If the result is over the trait value, it is a failure.

In *The Fortress of Woe*, the Game Master determines the effect of success and failure. Hit Point loss is the usual penalty for failure.

In the everyday world of the characters, the player who suggested the conflict should also act as facilitator, to help craft an interesting outcome, based on the various die rolls.

Characters don't have Hit Points, but the relevant trait must be temporarily lowered as a penalty for failure. Lowered traits can be raised by invoking a character's issue in a scene – one raise per scene.

Name:

Issue:

Vitality:

Charm:

Cunning:

Knowledge:

Notes:

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Name _____

Class _____

Vitality

Charm

Cunning

Knowledge

Special Ability

Treasure