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Steve Grand

Small Furry Creatures: A Mythography

Rationale

Within every myth and every legend, there lies a truth. Somewhere out there, not in our universe, but in a universe of Otherworlds, live all the monsters and mythical beasts that ever entered human imagination. The nature of these creatures and of the lands they occupy is perhaps not quite as men have imagined it, but they exist, nonetheless.

No-one is entirely sure whether it was echoes from this Alter-universe that shaped the stories in men's minds, or whether it was fevered human imagination itself that begat the Otherworlds: current evidence tends to support the latter hypothesis. In any case, it is well understood now that the rise of Rationalism in recent centuries has all but destroyed men's concern for the world of myth, and that this has corresponded with a calamitous shift in the fortunes of the Otherworlds. Whole species have been wiped out in an altered balance between Good and Evil. It is as if the good races of these strange lands have been deprived of moral support, and have lost the will to survive. Our myths may be derided as primitive stories, with no place in modern men's minds, but the demise of whole races of mythical creatures should be mourned, as an irrevocable loss to the richness of the human spirit.

Happily, modern developments in Virtual Reality have given us direct contact with this Alter-universe of our minds, and for some time now, explorers have been sailing strange seas and slashing their way through mysterious jungles, intent on describing and recording what little is left of these doomed civilisations before they are lost forever. But perhaps recording is not enough; perhaps we should try to do something; try to redress the balance and save these products of human thought from extinction. For some of these poor creatures, there is very little time left.

The game in brief

The user is presented with a large, living landscape — the surface of another world (called Albia, described in detail below). He exists in this world only as a virtual presence, a sort of remote-control existence, which the computer portrays as a hand-shaped mouse cursor.

In this world are a range of locations and strange creatures, related loosely (and with considerable poetic licence) to Northern myth. The user begins near to the long-abandoned home of a family of Norms (Small Furry Creatures), where a few eggs, languishing in a broken-down incubator, are almost all that remains of the Normir race.

By restoring power to the incubator, the user can hatch these eggs and interact with the newborn Norms. The home burrow contains a few other rooms, including a schoolroom, where the user can attempt to teach the Norms a language and other basic ideas. Other evidence round about will help the user to learn something of the ancient Normir culture.

There are limited food resources available in the burrow, and soon the Norms will be obliged to move on. Had the babies parents to tell them about it, they would know that a great journey is a requirement of all Norms: a spiritual quest that is necessary to ensure the renewal of life and the success of the next generation. If their quest is not achieved, then these few creatures will have been the last of the Normir.

The Journey

In ancient times, when the Normir were a thriving civilisation, a vital part of any growing Norm's life was The Journey. This trek took young Norms eastwards, right around the rim of Albia (see 'Albia', below), on a hazardous path of growth and enlightenment. The Journey culminated in a profound spiritual experience at the place known as Urd's Well, under the great World Tree, Yggdrasil. Following this initiation rite, the young Norms would come of age, and complete the circumnavigation, returning to their original home to lay eggs and bring up the new generation.

The traditional way was for an elder Norm (a grandparent) to accompany the younger Norms on the Journey. Unfortunately, there are no elders left, and without guidance from the user, the young Norms are unlikely to survive the trip, (or even begin the Journey at all). The Journey will take them across deserts and seas, over mountains (you cannot pass *round* a mountain on a world like Albia) and through the territory of other, not necessarily friendly, creatures.

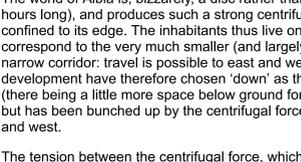
The limited supply of prepared food (Norms drink a juice made from berries that are poisonous in their untreated state) will inevitably demand that the Norms are 'encouraged' by the user to travel in search of more. Without tuition, however, the youngsters will not understand any of this, and if left alone will starve. It is up to the user to find a way of taking his young charges to a new source of food (and later learn how to prepare berry juice from scratch).

The journey is arduous, and Norms will inevitably fall prey to some malady, be it malnutrition, poisoning or illness, so the user will need to accrue a substantial amount of knowledge about Norm physiology if he is to protect and mend the infants on their way. Part way through the Journey, the Norms will reach the City of Niflheim, the capital of the settled (i.e. non-Journeying) Norm civilisation. Niflheim is now deserted, of course, but its hospitals, factories and libraries will constitute an important staging post, where the Norms can replenish their strength and spirit before continuing on their quest.

Albia

The world of Albia is, bizzarely, a disc rather than the usual sphere. This coin-shaped world spins rapidly on its axis (a day being only a couple of hours long), and produces such a strong centrifugal force that life has been unable to colonise the broad 'faces' of the planet, and instead has been confined to its edge. The inhabitants thus live on a narrow rim, where 'east' and 'west' are the dominant directions, and 'north' and 'south' correspond to the very much smaller (and largely irrelevant) distance from one face to the other. Living on Albia is therefore rather like being in a narrow corridor: travel is possible to east and west, but there is only space to north and south for limited storage, etc. Most attempts at development have therefore chosen 'down' as the most fruitful direction in which to proceed, and so the inhabitants of Albia tend to live in burrows (there being a little more space below ground for walls and such, due to the lenticular shape of the tiny planet). Liquid water exists on the surface, but has been bunched up by the centrifugal force until it too rides on the edge of the planet, forming narrow 'seas', trapped by higher ground to east and west.

The tension between the centrifugal force, which tries to fling everything outwards, and the force of gravity, which tries to hold them in again, is a major influence in dictating the oddities of Albian existence. Gravity is clearly strongest where the thickest amount of rock exists, ie. acting towards the centre through the radius of the disc, thus objects on the rim of the disc do not fly off into space, but remain firmly, if gently, attached. On the faces of the disc, gravity acts more weakly, and also at an angle of less than 180° to the centrifugal force. The resultant of these two forces is thus planetwards and outwards, making the faces untenable for anything not firmly fixed to the ground. This interaction of gravity and spin causes important groundwater and atmospheric circulation patterns (see Climate, below).



[This is a fairly implausible geomorphology, but is reasonably self-consistent as a justification for the game's viewpoint. Information on the subject can be made available to the user through Norm books.]

Astronomy

Albia has a single sun, which moves across the sky from west to east (the direction of the Norms' Journey). Because the plane of Albia's rotation coincides with its plane of orbit, the sun appears to slide directly overhead. The game viewpoint will therefore never allow the sun to be visible, but the colours of the sky, etc. will change from dawn through to dusk. At night, stars will be visible.

Because Albia is merely a thin disc, sunlight is scattered easily from the edges of the atmosphere, partially illuminating the night side of the planet. Nights are therefore never totally black, and Albians have never needed to develop lighting [*thank heavens; otherwise Norms etc. would have to change colour as they passed from burrow to surface!*].

Two discoid planets could not orbit each other without crashing, and close proximity between Albia and a conventional, spherical planet would have prevented Albia forming as a disc in the first place. Therefore, Albia has no moons.

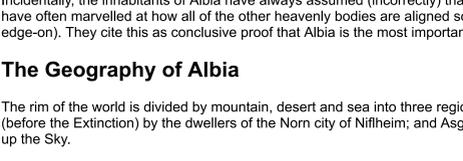
Incidentally, the inhabitants of Albia have always assumed (incorrectly) that the sun and other planets in that solar system are discs too, and they have often marvelled at how all of the other heavenly bodies are aligned so that their 'faces' are turned towards Albia (one never sees a planet edge-on). They cite this as conclusive proof that Albia is the most important world in the Universe.

The Geography of Albia

The rim of the world is divided by mountain, desert and sea into three regions: Outgard, where the Normir eggs are to be found; Midgard, ruled (before the Extinction) by the dwellers of the Norm city of Niflheim; and Asgard, a holy land in which lies the great World Tree Yggdrasil, that holds up the Sky.

Outgard is divided from Midgard by the Desert of Volund (named after a mythical metal-smith, as its wind blows as hot as bellows in a forge); Midgard in turn is split from Asgard by the Mountains of the Ragnarok, and Asgard from Outgard by the Meniscus Sea.

[Even though Asgard is immediately west of Outgard, the Journey must still be clockwise, as only a magical boat can safely cross the Meniscus Sea, and such vessels can only be found on the western shore. After the Enlightenment, a trip across the Sea will return the Norms from Asgard to their original home.]

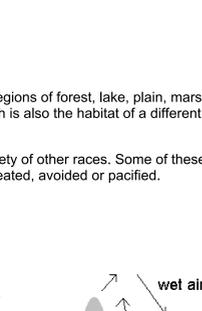


Besides the gross geography described above, each area is divided into smaller regions of forest, lake, plain, marsh, etc. Each of these has a name, which can be found by deciphering one of the Norm atlases in a library. Each is also the habitat of a different race of Albians (those few that remain in existence).

Throughout Albia are found the burrows, towns and cities of both Norms and a variety of other races. Some of these will provide food and shelter for the Norms, and some will harbour dangerous, predatory species, who must be defeated, avoided or pacified.

Climate & Conditions

The plane of Albia's orbit is roughly the same as its plane of rotation, and so the planet has no seasons to speak of. However, the discoid nature of Albia leads to a strange atmospheric circulation: moisture evaporates from the seas at the rim, then this less-dense moist air moves inwards (displaced by the higher density dry air, which is flung outwards more by the centrifugal force) towards the centre of the disc, where the moisture condenses into rain. The precipitated water is swallowed underground and returns under centrifugal force to the rim, where it emerges from springs that replenish the seas (Urd's Well is one such spring). This circulation system is distorted by protruberances on the uninhabited 'faces' of the planet, and this creates several climatic zones:-



Outgard is a fairly dry, barren land, with pockets of semi-desert that merge together at the east to form the hot, dry Desert of Volund.

Midgard is altogether greener and more lush, being protected somewhat by the Mountains of the Ragnarok. The more equable climate of Midgard explains why the Norms of Midgard abandoned their semi-nomadic lifestyle in favour of city dwelling.

The Mountains of the Ragnarok are extremely cold, but this is of little consequence, as they are impassable on foot anyway. [*Whatever means the ancient Norms might have used for crossing the mountains, the only suitable vehicle available to the latter day Journeyers is a gas balloon (if the user can figure out how to fill it), which can be found in a nearby settlement!*]. A variable wind crosses the mountains, and its changes of direction are of great significance to Normir aeronauts.

Asgard is still more lush, being between mountain and sea, and presents a tropical appearance. This partially explains its Elysian connotations in myth, and certainly rewards the weary traveller.

The Meniscus Sea is warm and has a gentle wind, which occasionally drops to a flat calm. The atmospheric circulation causes the wind to cross the sea from west to east during the first part of the day, and east to west later. Leaving one's sails hoisted all day long is therefore a surefire way to end up back where one started!

Night time on Albia is very cold, due to the limited heat capacity of such a narrow atmosphere. Particularly in the dryer areas, shelter is an important requirement once night falls.

Albian lifeforms

1. Norms

Appearance

The Normir are small, delicate creatures, and are rather like Hobbits in temperament. They were once a proud and wise race, who were technologically quite advanced. However, since the Extinction there are no teachers to pass this knowledge on to the newborn. The only remaining eggs will therefore hatch into Norms of a much less sophisticated sort, untamed by Normir culture. Norms are naturally shy, curious and fidgety creatures, with a lazy, hedonistic streak that often gets them into trouble. Imagine a Nursery class full of three-year-old humans, and you'll get the general idea.

Behaviour

The compulsive Journey of the Normir, apart from its role in the maturation and continuation of the race, held a greater significance for all of Albia: the journey from Outgard, through Midgard to Asgard and thence back to Outgard, signified the march from Past, through Present, to Future and back again (time, to the ancients of Albia, was a cyclic phenomenon, quite unlike the linear thing which the invention of 'progress' has created here on Earth). Without the Journey, Time could cease its relentless and reliable forward cycle, and might stop, or begin to move backwards, or sideways, or some such terrible thing (no-one was quite sure what the exact consequence would be, since no-one had dared to risk finding out). The Normir were thus the Spinners of Time, and proudly held the past, present and future of Albia, and beyond, in their small, furry hands.

The most holy place to a Norm, and the goal of their Journey, was the great tree which is said to hold aloft the Sky. This tree is called Yggdrasil, and beneath it is the well of Urd (which means "to become"), where the pubescent Norms bathed in a ritual that ensured their own, and Albia's, fertility. To bathe in Urd's well was to undergo a spiritual experience, in which the gift of life was passed on to each participant. On their safe return home, the newly adult Norms would become pregnant and lay eggs. These would hatch, and the whole cycle would begin again.

Habitat

There are (or rather were) two races of Norms: the Aesir, who lived in their homeland of Outgard and took part in the Journey, and the Vanir, who had later settled in Midgard, in the city of Niflheim (the Vanir still fully embraced the *concept* of the Journey, of course, but not to the extent of doing any actual *walking*). In both cases, Norms lived in small, homely burrows, well decorated with ornaments and pictures. Niflheim also consists of a scattering of individual burrows, but these surround a large, ramified municipal burrow, containing medical, literary, relaxation and other facilities. On the outskirts of most Norm settlements are factory burrows, for example for making the Norm's favourite food — a mead-like drink made from berries.

The landscape of Midgard is still fairly plentiful, but Outgard has become a wasteland since there have been no Normir farmers to tend it. Berries are now very rare in Outgard, and the travellers will often have to rely on finding caches of prepared juice in abandoned houses.

Language & culture

Before the Extinction, the Norms spoke and wrote a language (now largely lost) which human observers would recognise as vaguely similar in appearance to Old English or Old Norse. Previous human observers have indeed recognised it as such, and have been able to put together the beginnings of a lexicon, which will be available to future explorers. However, only a little is known, and the vocabulary seems in any case to be rather vague — a single word often standing for a whole range of ideas, according to context. Luckily, the home of the last remaining Norm egg contains an infant's word book. This might help the user to decipher the basic words of other Norm texts, which will be found scattered through the Norm settlements. Some effort will certainly be necessary if the user is to discover enough of Normir culture and technology to be of any help. Of course, the newborn Norms know nothing of the Normir language, and the user might do better if he tries to teach the infants the rudiments of his own language instead (whatever language that may be).

Some Normir Words:

- dic — ditch, hole, gap, hiatus
- Gied — story, life, journey
- Giededic — burrow ("life-ditch")

The ancient Norms were one of the most cultured and sophisticated races on Albia, and have left many books, works of art and mechanical constructions (see Architecture and Technology, below). Norm art was dominated by linear, and often zoomorphic interlaced patterns, constructed using an arcane mathematics.

The Normir had a strong religion, in the sense that they had a mystical awareness and a penchant for ritual, but had no actual gods of their own (to all intents and purposes, the Norms considered themselves to be gods, engaged in perpetuating all cycles of death and rebirth). Their high regard for the Metaphysical, however, caused them to build a number of temples (the only buildings on Albia that extend above ground level), foremost of which is the temple complex at Urd's Well. The Normir religion largely consists of ancestor worship.

2. Grendels

Appearance

Happily, there are very few Grendels left on Albia, for there is nothing to endanger them to anyone. A Grendel is a solitary, highly pugnacious creature, resembling a huge, titanium spider.

Behaviour

From 'Beowulf':
"As a first step, he set his hands on the available soldier, savagely tore at him, gnashed at his bone joints, bolted huge goblets, sucked at his veins, and had soon eaten all of the dead man, even down to his hands and feet."

Need I say more, except that Norms are a particularly succulent dish, in the (eight) eyes of a Grendel?

Habitat

Grendels prefer hot, arid areas. They live in isolated lairs underground: simple, unadorned burrows, just large enough for a Grendel to lurk in.

Language and culture

Apart from grisly munching noises, no-one has ever reported a Grendel actually speaking. Since they live in isolation, there is barely any need. The rare courtship behaviour of a pair of Grendels is a noisy affair, but one would scarcely describe it as conversational.

Grendels have no need whatsoever of the trappings of culture. They do not build anything other than burrows (which they'd steal from someone else anyway, given half a chance), and find much greater pleasure in destroying things. The nearest a Grendel ever comes to cultural behaviour is to refrain from belching after a meal, until decently re-settled into his burrow.

There is only one known exception to this lack of refinement, and that is that Grendels have a penchant for music. They don't create any of their own, of course, but it has been known for the rhythmic playing of a musical instrument to lull a Grendel into a temporary stupor. This is a good trick, if you know it. Another useful play when trying to pass a Grendel, is to give it something else to chew on, as food is definitely top of a Grendel's agenda.

3. The Side

Appearance

The Side (pronounced "shee") are an extremely ancient race, pre-dating the Normir by many centuries and descended from a quite different stock. The Side are slender, pale, humanoid creatures, who wear long, white robes. They are extremely wary of outsiders, and are rarely encountered.

Behaviour

The population were almost wiped out in the distant past, by the encroachment of the Normir and other races (who were all much more barbaric then). Only a very few Side remain, and those individuals are very old and stooped members of this long-lived race. In Norm mythology, the Side are considered to be great magicians (because of their early development of quantum-mechanical technologies, which they have never shared with the other races). They are very sensitive, shy creatures, and view all the other inhabitants of Albia as crass barbarians, who are offensive to Side sensibilities.

Language and culture

The Side are certainly a race apart, and have their own, softer-spoken language. Their tastes are somewhat spartan, but what they lack in material wealth, they make up for in the richness of their oral culture. They are great tellers of wise tales, but these are never committed to writing, and few who understand anything of the Side language have ever got close enough to learn of this wisdom. They are great inventors and experimenters (for the sake of understanding, rather than practical use), and are the owners of the one and only Albian gas balloon.

Because of their age and infirmity they find it difficult to fend for themselves, and are likely to welcome gifts, especially of food. They might, after a while, be wooed into returning the favour with a gift of their own.

Habitat

The only known remaining Side settlement is just west of the Mountains of the Ragnarok. They call this place Sid Breig Leith.

4. Jormungand, the World Serpent

The unique Jormungand is a long, dragon-like sea serpent. Jormungand patrols beneath the waters of the Meniscus Sea, chasing small fish. He has gained a terrible reputation amongst the Normir, for being a fearsome and dreaded foe to Journeyers on their return from Urd's Well, but the truth is, he is just a mite too playful for an animal of such bulk. He follows boats with enthusiasm, but unfortunately has a habit of overturning them. Once the hapless Norms fall into the water, what is there left for him to do than to eat them? Only a kindness, really.

5. Ettins

Ettins are small, lizard-like creatures, with astoundingly low intelligence. They live on the surface, under vegetation, and eat a variety of small plants and animals. They are found in no great significance to anything but a Grendel (to whom they make a satisfying snack), but were often kept by Norms as pets. They can be found just about anywhere on Albia.

Architecture and technology

Burrows are generally entered by means of elevators, down holes in the ground that are just narrow enough to allow people to pass by on one side, if they don't intend to descend.

The burrows themselves are variously decorated rooms, connected by lower and rougher-cut tunnels. Because the planet widens noticeably below ground level, the Norms are able to have suitably strong walls, but there is still only minimal space from front to back. Furniture, etc. therefore tends to line one or other wall, rather than be placed in the middle of the passageway. Doors, where they exist, are designed to slide up or down, as there is no room for them to open sideways.

Norm temples are some of the few buildings that extend above ground level (thus signifying their holiness). They are supported on stilts (leaving room for non-Norms to pass underneath), and are reached by elevators leading up to the first and second levels. The second, higher level is the 'inner' sanctum, entered before the Extinction only by Norm 'priests'. The temples concern themselves with the worship of ancestors, for example the temple of the Urdir dead. The normal procedure was to leave a corpse on the ground, between temple and crypt, until its skeleton had been picked clean by ettins, etc., then with great ceremony transfer the bones to storage shelves in the crypt.

Norm technology is fairly jamjar-and-stirring stuff. Most machines consist of motors, cogs and other moving parts. The Normir do have a rudimentary non-mechanical technology, based on vacuum tubes. Although it is primitive, they have developed fairly sophisticated uses for it, including medical imaging. The Side have a far more advanced set of tools, including nanotechnology and high-density, solid-state electronics, but they are not a pragmatic race, and are far more interested in such things for their novelty value than for actual applications. In truth, they're happier playing around with pulleys and levers, making exquisite but fairly pointless contraptions. None of the other Albian races has any technology at all to speak of.

A significant feature of most technological advance is that machines become able to do more and more work, yet use less and less power. For this reason, Side hi-tech devices seemingly require no energy source at all. Normir technology, however, requires great goblets of power, which they used to generate mostly from windmills or steam engines. Single homes and small settlements tend to use wind power, but the city of Niflheim demands the resources of a large steam engine, which of course has lain cold and untended now for a very long time. The Niflheim engine will need to be brought back into use before any of the city's machinery can be operated.

The Side's favourite toy is a flying machine, consisting of a gas balloon. The Side themselves are too old and infirm to enjoy flying any more, and will happily part with it in return for gifts. Unfortunately, since no-one understands how to speak the Side language, it is going to be a problem to find a source of gas with which to fill it. However, the marsh gas that bubbles up from Loxley Mere, not far away to the west from Sid Breig Leith, could be trapped (with a little teamwork) and used for the job, enabling the Norms to cross the Mountains of the Ragnarok.

One important area of Niflheim is the medical room, which contains a collection of drugs and a powerful body scanner. This can display tomograms of the Norm anatomy, and also brain scans showing electrical activity. This, and other instruments, will allow the user to learn about Norm physiology, both to satisfy his curiosity and to help him treat any ills that have befallen the Norms by this time.

Norms get their nourishment from a purple liquid, distilled from large berries found in most of the less arid areas of Albia. The berries themselves are mildly poisonous, but, like tapioca, the juice is harmless once treated. The Normir have thus developed small treatment plants, dotted around the landscape, where berries get fed into a hopper and crushed between rollers before being boiled over a fire. Once boiled, the juice is run off into bottles. Until and unless the user figures out how to produce juice, the Norms will have to rely on bottles that were filled and stored many years before. Happily, the juice doesn't go off (although an occasional batch might be found to have fermented!).

