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Italics refer to text in boxes.

Acknowledgements: Lots of plundering for this one! Original PDQ rules text by Chad Underkoffler; the version here is adapted from my own *Questers of the Middle Realms* game line, as is a chunk of other material. Learning Points originally from *The Zorcerer of Zo* by Chad Underkoffler. Sorcery rules partly inspired by *Castle Falkenstein* by Mike Pondsmith. Thanks to Chad Underkoffler, Orion Gates and Ralf Wagner for comments on the draft.





INTRODUCTION

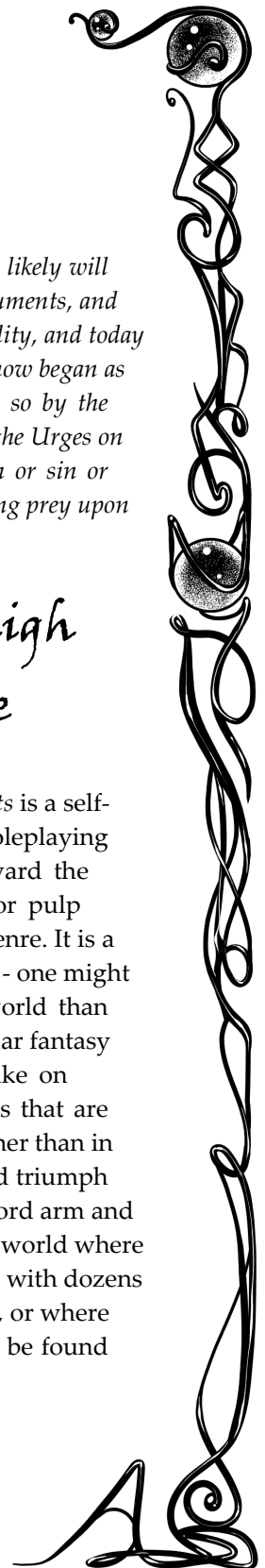
This is an old world. Civilisations have risen and fallen; and most likely will again. Now hunting beasts prowl the ruins of their cities and monuments, and tribes take refuge in their shadows. They fell by cataclysm and senility, and today we know little enough of their ways and lore. But the peoples we know began as their scions or servants, and those that are different were made so by the ancients' arts to suit their purposes. Some say it was they who set the Urges on their current course of conflict and destruction, whether by plan or sin or mishap. It is an axe-age, a sword-age, a storm-age... where the strong prey upon the weak and death can come suddenly.

"Roleplaying game"?

A roleplaying game (RPG) is a leisure activity for a group of people. These *players* sit around pretending to be imaginary *characters* having adventures in a fictional setting. Each controls a player character (PC), except one who takes the role of Game Master (GM), setting up situations for the PCs and controlling the other characters they meet (non-player characters, NPCs). The players say what their characters do and the GM tells them what happens next; they use the rules to decide whether actions succeed or fail. The *story* progresses through *scenes* of actions at particular locations. You'll need pencils and paper and two or three six-sided *dice* each.

Days of high adventure

Jaws of the Six Serpents is a self-contained fantasy roleplaying game that aims toward the sword-and-sorcery or pulp fantasy side of the genre. It is a simpler, more direct - one might say more *macho* - world than those of many popular fantasy RPGs. Characters take on adversity for reasons that are usually personal rather than in any grand cause, and triumph through a strong sword arm and quick wits. It's not a world where marketplaces throng with dozens of intelligent species, or where enchanted items can be found under every rock.





Author's note

This game originally arose from comments about my PDQ fantasy game *Questers of the Middle Realms*, which is aimed at traditional fantasy roleplaying with a humorous twist. "That's all very well", said the commenters, "but why don't you do a *serious* PDQ fantasy game?" So you can see that if there's any blame to be apportioned for this project it should fall on those guys.

It did, however, match up with my desire to try something a bit darker in tone than most of the previous PDQ games, and to try to get something useful and interesting into an even smaller package. Although designed with a particular setting, it should serve as a framework for all sorts of games toward one particular end of the big fantasy pool. Or, perhaps, ends. I had in mind sources from Robert E Howard's robust barbarian Conan, in both story and movie versions, to the cynical, reluctant heroes of David Gemmell's dark fantasy. To what extent it's succeeded, either in breadth or depth, I leave for the reader to judge.

Magic is present, well known and powerful, but the sorcerers who practise it are few and often regarded with fear and hostility for the danger they present. Large "civilised" settlements are few and far between, and harsh environments are themselves challenging opponents for characters. "Monsters" are usually other people; fierce beasts, often larger and more aggressive than their counterparts in our own world; or unnatural things that claw their way in from realms beyond or are created by sorcery.

Jaws also aims to support darker fantasy - worlds with low technology, some magic, supernatural creatures and - crucially - characters who are up against it, with death a constant companion. These tales tend to have a pragmatic and unflattering view of human nature, shared by most of the characters in the setting, and main characters wrestle with whether they can or should rise above this.



This book

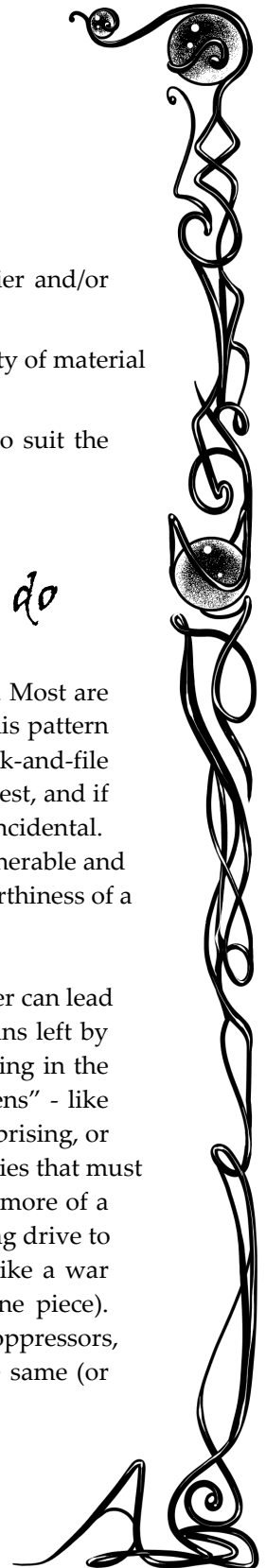
Jaws has three parts.

- A rules toolkit, customising the PDQ system for pulpier and/or darker fantasy games.
- A setting outline you can use for such games (with plenty of material you can swipe for settings of your own).
- A GM's section with notes for customising the game to suit the setting of your choice, and general notes to aid in play.

Who they are and what they do

Certainly in the pulpier fantasy, characters are very capable. Most are warriors, thieves or both - but even those departing from this pattern should be able to handle themselves in a fight against rank-and-file opponents. They are driven primarily by their own self-interest, and if they accomplish something in a greater cause that's largely incidental. On the darker side, some characters might start off more vulnerable and focus on their emotional journey; and grappling with the worthiness of a cause versus one's self-interest is a well-used theme.

As to what they do... the desire for wealth, power or whatever can lead them to theft and intrigue in the cities, or to explore the ruins left by ancient empires. A lot of stories are basically incidental, fitting in the loose mould of, "While you're trying to do this, that happens" - like wandering into a town and getting embroiled in a coup or uprising, or entering a supposedly deserted tomb and finding monstrosities that must not be released upon the world. Other stories might follow more of a quest or vision route, where the characters have some burning drive to fulfil and events are stages on the way to achieving that, like a war against a mighty foe (winning it, or just coming out in one piece). Opponents can be political factions, the thieves' guild, local oppressors, things from the outer Dark or rival characters pursuing the same (or contrary) goals.





The world of the Six Serpents

The world is not what it was; and perhaps not what it will be in ages to come. Civilised folk gather in a small number of towns and cities, and some of these are great, but the wilderness around is greater.

On the western coast the city of Sartain looks out over the waters of the Westmare, toiling and scheming. The forests of the southern promontory hide ruined cities and dangerous beasts. Beyond, the city of Nilsomar on the Sea of the Moon hides behind masks and a sweet-smelling haze. To the east, the mountains block off such lands as might lie beyond. From there the Blackworm River runs all the way to the west. Elsewhere in the interior, travellers in the round desert of the Empty Cup tread the dust of elder civilisations beneath their feet.

Everyone knows that the world is shaped by six forces or energies known as the Urges: Fire, Metal, Wood, Earth, Wind and Water. They are depicted as a hexagon formed by serpents, each biting the tail of the next in a cycle of domination or destruction (Wind conquers Water, Water conquers Fire, Fire conquers Metal, and so on). The harshness and instability of the land is due to conflicts between these forces. Some legends say they are actually great dragons, possibly the original creators of the world and now entombed within it. There is much symbolism relating the Urges to physical, mental and social phenomena. This is the extent of the common folk's knowledge: they leave the debate of such things to the sages and get on with the business of daily life.

People speak fearfully of the Dark Below, generally visualised as a black void below the wheel of the Urges, home to various unhuman and hostile entities. Sometimes these beings are summoned by corrupt sorcerers, or find their own way to the world, where they seek to dominate and corrupt or to feed on lives and souls. Scholars recognise a "Dark Urge" energy connected to this Realm and its inhabitants. Some people - notably the priestly order of Intercessors - also talk about the Light Above, a realm where the spirits of the Worthy Dead go and from whence these good spirits may sometimes send aid to the living.

WORLD OF THE SIX SERPENTS





AN OVERVIEW

Most of the land is wilderness of one kind or another, often harsh and holding dangers, from weather to wild creatures to the occasional supernatural visitation. Most people gather together in settlements. (If you meet someone living out in the wilderness they're probably weird, extremely tough, not what they seem or fallen on hard times - or some combination thereof.) By modern standards there aren't large numbers of people at this point in the setting's history.

People

Technology is what you might call "dark age": there are skilled practitioners of craft trades like masonry and metalwork, but the sailing ship is pretty much the pinnacle of complex engineering. Sorcery and alchemy are the bleeding edge of "science".

The setting has all the sorts of **occupations** one might expect: mercenary warriors, thieves, minstrels, courtesans, crafters, diplomats, scribes, farmers, hunters, sailors...

There are more arcane callings too. **Sorcerers** have learned to manipulate Urge flows through arcane formulae and the power of the will. Given enough skill and the right circumstances they can achieve almost anything - but it is a dangerous pursuit, and mistakes can cost dearly. There's also the fact that a lot of people fear and distrust sorcerers. It is often a lonely path; for many sorcerers, in the end, power is their only companion. **Seers** exist in many guises, like old crones sniffing the vapours and hawk-nosed priests inspecting the intestines of a sacrifice (animal or otherwise). But probably the most common are astrologers, who examine the positions of the stars, and geomancers who perceive the influence of the Serpents and their Urges in the landscape and deduce the fortunes of a place.



Different cultural groups have their own **religious** beliefs and practices, usually following a single deity or a small number. None of these are dominant in the setting, and there's no particular evidence to prove they're "real". Some priests have access to appropriate magics, and while some might treat these as miraculous proof most folk just regard it as something learned types do.

One belief that *has* spread widely is the Cult of the Worthy Ancestors. They believe that these ancestors, also known as the Good Spirits, watch over mortal folk and stand in opposition to the Dark Below and the strife between the Serpents. On one level it's quite a simple and comforting belief, and many ordinary people pay at least lip service to it. Priests of the Cult are called Intercessors, and they have the ability to interact with the Ancestors for brief periods. More on them below.

Geography

The western coast

The waves of the Westmare are travelled by many vessels, both merchantmen and the pirates that prey upon them - but still few enough that you can go days without seeing another sail, or arrive at an island that has never been named or charted, with ancient (and, inevitably, deadly) secrets.

The great city of **Sartain** dominates the middle region of the coast. The natural dangers of its environs have been tamed, for the most part, but the hearts of civilised men hold their own dangers. While visiting its bustling markets and sumptuous courts, remember to look over your shoulder.

Further north lie wilder hills, moors and valleys. These are the **Kalet Lands**, home to the Kalet people, also known as the Earth Tribes - warlike farmers and hunters who live in simple steads and follow the earth goddess. The small sea-town of **Bryhope** has long served as a place for meetings between different clans, and for trade with the outside world.

