the Zantabulous Zorcerer of Zo

A FAIRYTALE ROLE-PLAYING GAME

by Chad Underkoffler

ATOMIC SOCK MONKEY PRESS

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A FAIRYTALE ROLE~PLAYING GAME

(a PDQ campaign in actual play)

by Chad Underkoffler

PROSE DESCRIPTIVE QUALITIES (PDQ) SYSTEM

DESIGN BY: Chad Underkoffler

PLAYTESTING & ADDITIONAL WRITING BY: Andrew Byers & Scott Kane

COVER: Scott Kane & Greg Holkan   **LOGO:** Greg Holkan

INTERIOR ART: Fred Hicks, Greg Holkan, & Scott Kane

LAYOUT: Fred Hicks   **EDITOR:** Eric A. Burns

ILLUSTRATION MODELS: Andrew Byers (p. 132), Mikayla DeMarino (p. 51 & p. 69), Allison Kaese (p. 129), Steven Solomon (p. 19), Aylish Walton (p. 90), and Nolah Walton (p. 120)

PEER REVIEWERS

Eric A. Burns	Fred Hicks	Patrick Sweeney
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ABOUT THE PDQ SYSTEM

The rules inside this book build upon the Prose Descriptive Qualities (PDQ) System, suitably modified for fairytale play (the "Good Parts" version). PDQ Core is available as a free download from the following URLs:

http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com/freebies/di/pdq-core.pdf

http://www.rpgnow.com/product_info.php?products_id=4175&

http://e23.sjgames.com/item.html?id=ASM-000

PDQ has been designed for evocative simplicity, speed, and flexibility. It currently serves as the core game mechanics for **Dead Inside: the Roleplaying Game of Loss & Redemption** (**DI**); **Monkey, Ninja, Pirate, Robot: the Roleplaying Game** (**MNPR:RPG**); **Truth & Justice** (**T&J**); and **The Zorcerer of Zo** (**ZoZ**).

Rules and concepts from all Atomic Sock Monkey Press games easily interconnect. For example, if one chooses to, the Soul Point mechanics of *DI* could be used to steal the soul of a *ZoZ* Princess, and the Powers rules in *T&J* could be used for ideas on how to interpret *ZoZ* magical Gifts into even more sharply-defined game mechanics.

ABOUT ATOMIC SOCK MONKEY PRESS

http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com/

Atomic Sock Monkey Press is dedicated to high-quality, off-kilter, imaginative fun. That means tabletop games of both the "beer & pretzels" and roleplaying game (RPG) varieties. Check out the following webpages on the site for *ZoZ* resources and downloads:

http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com/products/zoz.asp

http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com/freebies.asp

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chad Underkoffler is an editor for a telecommunications standards body by day and a freelance game writer by night. He's been gaming since 1981, to the confusion of his family. His column "Campaign in a Box" appears in Pyramid Online at < *http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid* >; he has written material for **Gamma World** (Sword & Sorcery), **GURPS** (Steve Jackson Games), and **Unknown Armies** (Atlas Games); and he is the author and publisher of **Dead Inside: the Roleplaying Game of Loss & Redemption**; **Monkey, Ninja, Pirate, Robot: the RPG**; and **Truth & Justice**. Chad currently lives in Alexandria, VA, with his wife Beth and their two black cats.

Introduction
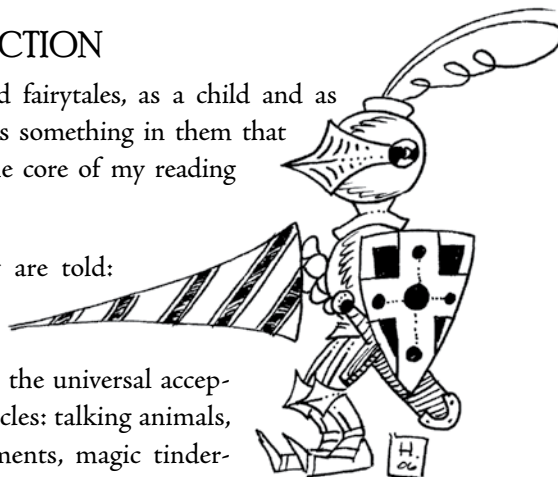# Once Upon a Time...

Personal Reflection

I have always loved fairytales, as a child and as an adult. There is something in them that drives right to the core of my reading enjoyment.

Perhaps it's the way they are told: spare in detail, but evocative enough to spur the imagination. Or maybe it's the universal acceptance of wonders and miracles: talking animals, witches working enchantments, magic tinderboxes, houses made of gingerbread. Then again, it could be the strong and boldly drawn characteristics of the denizens of such tales: noble princesses, lucky third sons, dastardly villains. Or it could be the rush of pure emotions and concepts that really exist in these stories: Revenge, Forgiveness, True Love. Or it might be that fairytales are *fair*: the broken will become strong, the silenced will laugh, the voiceless shall sing, and the wicked will be punished.

It's a heady mix of flavors, one that children find delicious, but most adults can find cloying. For my part, I like strong drink.

In late 2005, after the release of *Truth & Justice*, my players asked me to run a new campaign. Given my writing and work commitments (and those of my players), time was at a premium. I told them that we'd have to use *PDQ* for ease of preparation and speed of play in a "seat of the pants" sort of game. I'd provide a list of campaign concepts. We'd then vote to select one that we were all interested in. My players agreed. We voted, and a fairytale campaign idea came out on top. We began having monthly sessions of *The Zorcerer of Zo*.

It was great. Prep was easy, the characters were vibrant and active, and everyone was having a good time. There was a lot of laughter, snappy dialogue, and great fun that well-matched the genre. This ended up being one of the best campaigns I've ever run.

One of my players started urging me to publish the campaign. "I'd hate to have the campaign and setting never see the light of day," he said. I wasn't sure that there was enough for an entire book, other than the very short sketch of a setting that I'd sent out as a game prospectus.

But then I recalled Aaron Allston's classic *Champions* supplement, *Strike Force*, which essentially detailed Allston's long-running campaign. I realized I hadn't seen many game books that stepped through an entire campaign from start to finish. Also, I thought of the increasing number of "Actual Play" campaign threads on Internet RPG forums.

Maybe I could produce a slim book providing a description of how our campaign came together: how ideas were incorporated into the game, how adventures were developed, and how characters and plots formed. The book would have information on a setting, yes, but unlike most RPG books, it could have "behind the gamemaster's (GM's) screen" type notes on how I assembled the system and setting elements, how the player characters (PCs) interpreted and altered them, and what the players thought of all this! Suffice to say, this would be a different sort of gaming product.

My players thought this was a great idea.

Thus, this book.

What this Book Contains

Inside *The Zorcerer of Zo* (*ZoZ*), you'll find: a discussion on fairytales as a literary and gaming genre; the Zantabulous Land of Zo game setting with NPCs; a complete game system (the "Good Parts" PDQ); notes on how I started, developed, ran, and ended the first *ZoZ* campaign (and advice on how you can do the same yourself); two "DVD commentary tracks" of textboxes – one from me as the GM and one from my players; and an Appendix full of Bonus Materials.

How to Use This Book

If you are interested in using *ZoZ* to run your own fairytale campaign, read Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

If you are interested in reading about the ZoZ campaign I ran, concentrate on the *Behind the Curtain* and *Player Commentary* textboxes in Chapters 4 and Chapters 6 and 7, plus the Appendix.

The Beginning

ZoZ came from my group voting on short, one-paragraph blurbs of campaigns I was interested in running. A short blurb on a "Faerie Tale Fantasy" campaign came up the winner. I asked some questions of the players, then sat down to write up a sketch of a setting. (This entire process is described in the *Appendix*, p. 160.)

The information in the textbox below is the *entirety* of the campaign design for the initial *ZoZ* campaign – before the players made up their characters, at least. All additional details in the description of the setting (see *Chapter 2*) or in the NPC descriptions (see *Chapter 4*) were either added during play or (rarely) the writing of this book.

Behind the Curtain: GM (Proto Zo)

The Zantabulous Land of Zo!

The magic empire of Zo is composed of five smaller countries:

1. **Zo Proper**: Jade City, ruled by the Zorcerer of Zo. Vaguely pan-Asian; metropole of the Zo Empire, though in practice never exercises his power. Zolanders are known for their keenness of observation and manners. Center of Map. Green.

2. **Azul**: Farmland and forest. Azulites are known for their industriousness and perseverance. East of Map. Blue.

3. **Rosso**: Port cities, trade and fishing. Rossons are known for their adventurous and romantic nature. South of Map. Red.

4. **Giallo**: Plains given to farmland (grain) and herding. Giallons are known for their courage and pragmatism. West of Map. Yellow.

5. **Viola**: Hills and mountains; mining and crafting. Violanders are known for their intellects and inventiveness. Viola has a slightly higher number of magical things – and thus magic-users – hanging around. North of Map. Purple.

Throughout the Zo Empire there are witches, dragons, ogres, talking and dumb beasts, fairies, lucky third sons, princesses, evil step-mothers, the whole megillah.

Notable NPCs (Location; Attitude)

The Zorcerer of Zo, *Emperor and Magician (Zo Proper; Not Known)*
The Great Bird *(Zo Proper; Nasty)*
The Sewer Creeper *(Zo Proper; Neutral)*
The Grovelin *(Zo Proper; Neutral)*
The Smiling Soldier *(Zo Proper; Nice)*
Count Alphonse, *Brilliant Aristocrat (Azul; Nasty)*
The Blue Hood, *Bandit Queen and Renowned Archer (Azul; Nice)*
Wickerwalker, *Monstrous Construct (Azul; Not Known)*
King Glamorgan, *Aged Hero (Rosso; Nice)*
Hella, *the Fire Fairy (Rosso; Nasty)*
Captain Mouse *(Rosso; Neutral)*
The Marquis de Carabas, *Feline Aristocrat (Giallo; Nice)*
The Roly-Poly Prince, *Rolling Thunder (Giallo; Nasty)*
Snow Witch, *Mistress of Mirrors (Giallo; Neutral)*
Princess Paige, *Lost in a Good Book (Viola; Nice)*
Quellabaum, *King of the Winged Monkeys (Viola; Neutral)*
Stig, *Ogre Overlord (Viola; Nasty)*

The Return of the Wolf

Shaykosch, the Deathless Wolf, has once again returned from the grave. He and his numerous wicked followers sow discord throughout the Zantabulous Land of Zo. While every few decades a new hero puts the Wolf down eventually the creature rises again amidst the huffing and puffing wind. Beast, sorcerer, and shapeshifter, he stalks the land and wreaks havoc.

The Blue Tailor stopped him once, stitching his shadow to a rock with magic needle and thread, then dropping the rock into Bottomless Chasm. The Wooden Pirate filleted him on the Southern Sea, scattering the Wolf's guts as chum for the Lightning Sharks. Another time, the Horse Prince trampled him into the muddy fields of Giallo after a long, running battle. Theodora the Witch Girl

> *matched him spell for spell, and finally triumphed. And there are a dozen other tales of the Wolf's deaths and returns.*
>
> *Who will stop him this time? And how? Will some brave soul beg the Zorcerer to stretch forth his power? Or would collecting the magical weapons used against Shaykosch in the past be helpful? Who knows?*

Player Comment on Proto-Zo (Scott)

Yep, believe it or not folks, this was the extent of Zo as we knew it!

With the five hundred words in this textbox, we were able to build an entire campaign that was fun and well received all-around.

How did we do that?

In Chapter 5, I lay out many of the gamemastering methods I used while running the campaign, but there's one underlying concept that I think is involved with regard to the brief sketch found in the textbox above. The amount of information that everyone has to know regarding the campaign and the world is *just right* – exactly as Goldilocks found all of the Baby Bear's goods (neither too hot nor too cold; neither too hard nor too soft). Providing less detail than is found above leaves everyone all at sea, unsure of what actually fits inside the game. Providing more detail than is in the textbox begins to set more down in stone, eliminating possibilities and requiring stronger continuity and remembering of facts by all involved.

As I mention in *Truth & Justice* when discussing the "Animated" style of superhero gaming, the key phrase developed by Chipp Kidd and Bruce Timm for the various DC Comics animated properties was "Limited detail for maximum motion." That is, verbal and visual shorthands were used to keep things fast, evocative, and ready for action. In a fairytale, *everything* – setting, characters, plots – is similarly stripped down to the basic concept or archetype: the Woods, the Wolf, the Woodcutter. The elements of the tale themselves are just seeds (powerful ones!). It is the telling of the tale that makes them flower into unique shapes. In an RPG, it is the decisions, actions, and performances of the GM *and* the players that cause these seeds to grow.

I urge you to take the information within this book, plant your own seeds, and grow your own adventures in the Zantabulous Land of Zo!

PDQ Master Chart

Level	As Quality Rank	Mod to 2D6 roll	As Difficulty Rank	Target Number
Poor	Notably Inept.	-2	A trivial task.	5
Average	Typical human capability.	0	Straightforward task.	7
Good	Better than usual; most professionals or talented newcomers.	+2	Complex task, requiring attention to detail.	9
Expert	Noted/famed professional; talent with skill to back it up.	+4	Intricate task, difficult and requiring sharp concentration, hard for a typical untrained person (Average).	11
Master	Acclaimed genius: talent with substantial skill behind it.	+6	Extremely difficult task, hard for most professionals in the field (Good).	13

Uses for Hero Points

Clearing the Fog. Regain 1d6 lost Failure Ranks per 1 HP and 1 action/reaction.

Digging Down Deep. Convert 1 Learning Point into 1 HP.

Fairy Godmother. 1 HP to get ideas from other players around the table; 2 HP to get ideas from the GM; 4 HP for some form of in-game intervention.

Favor's Reward. 1 HP and a Scene to get information only; 2 HP and a Scene to get some other sort of aid; **subject to GM veto**.

Heroic Serendipity. 2 HP per plausible coincidence, or 4 HP per implausible coincidence.

My Heart is Pure. Gain an Upshift to Rank for next roll. 2 HP per Upshift.

Second Wind. Regain 1d6 lost Damage Ranks. 2 HP and one Turn per die of recovery.

Silver Shoes. Ignore damage. 1HP per Damage/Failure Rank.

Strength of Ten. Add an Upshift (+2) to Damage only. 1 HP per Upshift.

Tale-spinning. Dictate a new fact: 1 HP per minor detail, 2 HP per significant detail, or 4 HP per major detail; **subject to GM veto**.

GM's Player Notes

Character Name	
Learning Points	
Hero Points	
Story Hooks	

Character Name	
Learning Points	
Hero Points	
Story Hooks	

Character Name	
Learning Points	
Hero Points	
Story Hooks	

Character Name	
Learning Points	
Hero Points	
Story Hooks	

Reward Hero Points for...

Heroic Actions (1+ HP) ◆ Affected By Weakness (1 HP)

Something Bad Happens (2d6 HP)

Good Play (1+ HP)

GM's NPC Record Sheet

NPC Name:				
Description				
Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality
M+6	M+6	M+6	M+6	M+6
E+4	E+4	E+4	E+4	E+4
G+2	G+2	G+2	G+2	G+2
A0	A0	A0	A0	A0
P-2	P-2	P-2	P-2	P-2

NPC Name:				
Description				
Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality
M+6	M+6	M+6	M+6	M+6
E+4	E+4	E+4	E+4	E+4
G+2	G+2	G+2	G+2	G+2
A0	A0	A0	A0	A0
P-2	P-2	P-2	P-2	P-2

NPC Name:				
Description				
Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality
M+6	M+6	M+6	M+6	M+6
E+4	E+4	E+4	E+4	E+4
G+2	G+2	G+2	G+2	G+2
A0	A0	A0	A0	A0
P-2	P-2	P-2	P-2	P-2

Difficulties

Difficulty Rank	Description	TN
Poor	A trivial task.	5
Average	Straightforward task.	7
Good	Complex task.	9
Expert	Intricate task, hard for an untrained person.	11
Master	Extremely difficult task, hard for professionals of the field.	13
Improbable	Beyond most masters of the field!	19
Impossible	Legendary prowess required!	25

Once upon a time, in the zantabulous land of Zo...

the Zantabulous Zorcerer of Zo
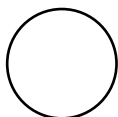A FAIRYTALE ROLE-PLAYING GAME

... there was a: _____

... from: _____
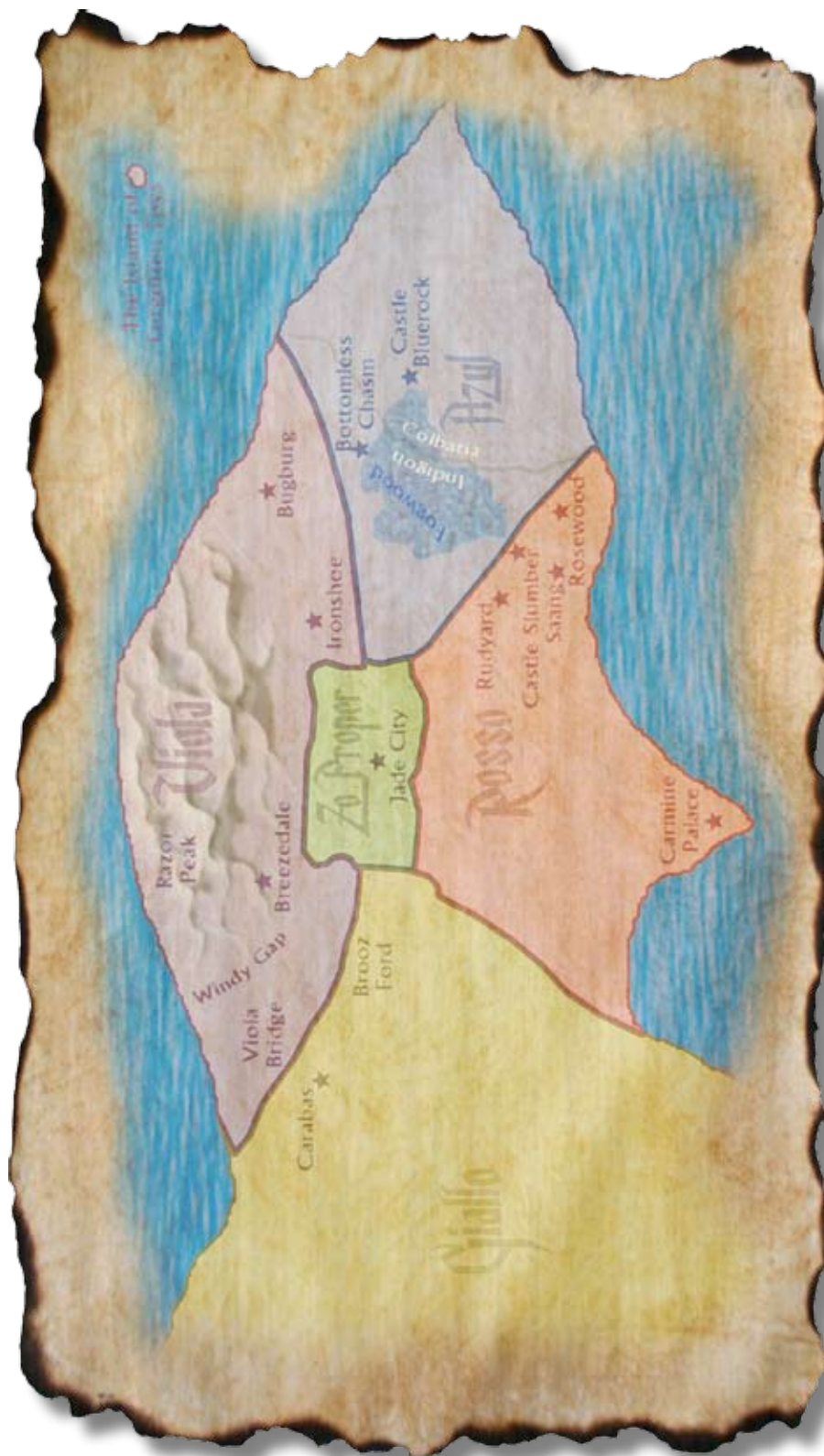
... named: _____
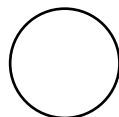
...whose many fine QUALITIES included:

QUALITIES	*OR !	MASTER [+6]	EXPERT [+4]	GOOD [+2]	AVERAGE [0]	POOR [-2]	GONE!
_____	___	○	○	○	○	○	○
_____	___	○	○	○	○	○	○
_____	___	○	○	○	○	○	○
_____	___	○	○	○	○	○	○
_____	___	○	○	○	○	○	○
_____	___	○	○	○	○	○	○
_____	___	○	○	○	○	○	○
_____	___	○	○	○	○	○	○

...as well as a vast MISCELLANY of details, like:

HERO POINTS ◯

LEARNING POINTS ◯

Lions and Tigers and Bears...

...and More!

the Zantabulous Zorcerer of Zo

A FAIRYTALE ROLE~PLAYING GAME

Tailors face giants, enchanted queens dance with human peasants, talking creatures perform domestic duties, witches cast curses, and fairies grant blessings.

And all are seeking their happily ever after.

The Zorcerer of Zo (ZoZ) is a fairytale RPG by Atomic Sock Monkey Press, Publishers of *Dead Inside* and *Truth & Justice.*

www.atomicsockmonkey.com

Once upon a time, in the zantabulous land of Zo...

The *Zorcerer of Zo (ZoZ)* contains:

- A discussion on the nature of fairytales.
- How to adapt fairytales to RPG campaigns.
- An evocative setting: the *Zantabulous Land of Zo!*
- The "Good Parts" **PDQ System!**
- The initial *ZoZ* campaign: how it came to be, how player characters were created, how the game was run, and how the campaign came to an exciting climax (and how you can do this too!).
- Two "DVD commentary tracks" of textboxes — one from the author/GM and one from the players of the PCs — on the **Actual Play** of the campaign.
- An appendix stuffed with **Bonus Material**.

Go ahead: **be zantabulous!**

The Zorcerer of Zo
Atomic Sock Monkey Press

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