

HIST 341
ANATOMY OF THE FANTASTIC

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Course Website
<http://edspace.american.edu/cave17/>

Office Hours
Tuesdays & Fridays, 11:00-12:00
Battelle-Tompkins 153



COURSE DESCRIPTION

Ever the since the first palm print on a Paleolithic cave wall, our ancestors have been inventing and imagining fantastic worlds parallel to our own—worlds that cannot be seen, touched, or empirically verified. Not only that, but our species has also expended significant time, energy, and material resources into articulating complex simulations of interaction with these invisible worlds. Though the most familiar and frequently engaged realms of the fantastic in recorded history have been those articulated by organized religions, competing visions of fantastic worlds have always thrived alongside and even within them. In this course we will explore the history of our species’ penchant not only for telling stories about these fantastic worlds, but also simulating complex engagements with them. Toward this end, students will study the narrative structure and mechanical gameplay elements of role-playing fantasy games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and its many successors, with the goal of teaching students how to develop their own historically inspired fantasy role-playing game. Last but not least, we will also interrogate the history behind common tropes and cliches of the fantasy genre, such as magic, bestiaries, Old Norse runes, and representations of “little people.”

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE:

This course will proceed through four distinct phases over the course of the semester:

- 1) **Weeks 1-3:** A theoretical and historical overview of the fantasy genre (i.e., “fantastic storytelling traditions”) that explores the diverse influences—such as war games, Robert E. Howard pulp fiction stories, *Lord of the Rings*—that inspired the groundbreaking fantasy world simulation game *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974. This part of course will take the form of illustrated lectures by the instructor.
- 2) **Weeks 4-8:** Student immersion in text-based simulations of fantasy worlds via the unique medium of role-playing fantasy gamebooks that were popular back in the 1980s and 90s (and are now experiencing a nostalgic revival). Our goal during this phase of the course is to understand just how such literary simulations work (or don’t work) at the structural and narrative level. For most class sessions,

students will complete a different type of gamebook prior to coming to class, then discuss the experience of these literary simulations of fantasy worlds with an eye toward developing their own narrative simulations in the latter half of this course. Once we have sampled several different types of gamebooks, we will take a closer look at how *Dungeons & Dragons* operates at a structural level, with emphasis on its unique performative aspects.

- 3) **Weeks 10-13:** Detailed historical lectures on some of the major cultural phenomena that have been adopted, integrated, and reworked into the fantasy genre of literature, film, and video games. The goal of this phase of the course is to contextualize—by means of the latest historical scholarship—frequently misunderstood phenomena such as magic, bestiaries, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon heritage, Old Norse runes, Japanese *yokai*, and other “traditions of the strange” throughout the globe.
- 4) **Weeks 14-15:** Students on stage! Having learnt all about the history of the fantasy genre, its historical influences and distortions, and how narrative role-playing games work at both textual and performative levels, students will run their own live hour-long session of the narrative role-playing game they have developed over the last month of the semester. During each class session, several students will lead their own separate groups of 3-4 of their classmates in an imaginative journey through the historically inspired fantastic world that they have created.

STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

WEEKLY GAMEBOOK ASSIGNMENTS. WEEKS 4-8. During the portion of the course when we are playing various gamebooks, you will be required to submit a different type of assignment for each gamebook that we play. The details of each assignment are noted below in the Course Schedule description for that day. They include such simple (but fun!) exercises as creating a grid map of the subterranean lairs of Firetop Mountain, an annotated decision tree for *Flight from the Dark*, and completed Adventure Sheets. These assignments are mostly designed to ensure that each student actually puts forth a good-faith effort to play through each gamebook and will generally receive full credit if the final assignment that you turn in reveals close engagement with the content of the gamebook.

BLOODSWORD REPORT. DUE MARCH 7. At some point before March 4 you will need to arrange a multi-player gamebook session with several of your classmates so that you can play *Bloodsword: The Battle Pits of Krarth*. (You can find your randomly generated classmates for this activity on Canvas.) The *Bloodsword* gamebook series is incredibly unique in being the one and only fantasy gamebook I am aware of that has devised rules for several players to participate in the same text-based adventure.

This multi-player session with your classmates should last about 2-3 hours, with each student taking turns reading the narrative entries. Though you will not be able to complete the entire adventure within such a short time frame, you will get a good sense of how a multi-player gamebook operates on both a narrative and structural level. (To complete the entire gamebook, you would likely need 4-5 hours together—and you are certainly encouraged to do so if your group has the time and inclination.) In order to make the most of your time together, all students should read the introductory materials in *Bloodsword* before coming to the group session, and perhaps even choose your characters beforehand via text and e-mail.

Participation in this group session outside of class is mandatory and will be documented in the *Bloodsword* Report assignment that you will turn in on March 7. Students whose group includes a classmate who does not respond to planning e-mails and texts or does show up and participate in the full two-hour game session should notify the instructor. Such students will not be permitted to turn in a *Bloodsword* Report and will receive a “0” for this assignment.

After your (likely aborted) gamebook session with your classmates, you should continue the adventure to its conclusion (i.e., death or victory) on your own using the same four characters that you used with your classmates—you can pick up right where your party left off, playing the parts of all four characters rather than just your original one (the gamebook instructions explicitly allow for this possibility). Make sure you have a record of your classmates’ character statistics before adjourning the group session.

A final word of advice: in selecting your *Bloodsword* characters and recording their statistics, you should **add an additional two levels of experience** to your characters beyond what is stipulated in the book’s rules in order to have any chance of making it far along in the *Bloodsword* adventure. Trust me, the authors vastly underestimated the difficulty level of the adventure they created!

As for the *Bloodsword* Report itself, it should consist of 750-1,000 words and contain your insightful reflections about both the group gameplay experience and your solo gameplay experience, along with an analysis of the unique multi-player design of the *Bloodsword* RPG template. How did your multi-player gamebook experience differ from your solo gamebook experiences? Give a couple of examples. How could you adapt your *Bloodsword* gameplay experience into your own live, historically inspired fantastic role-playing game (i.e., your Final Project)? Does *Bloodsword* contain all the structural elements necessary to adapt its template into any other type of role-playing game, such as a video game or live role-playing game? What else could you add or perhaps substitute? I am particularly eager to hear your thoughts about the social aspects of your multi-player game, as this is typically one of the most satisfying—but also potentially frustrating—aspects of a live role-playing fantasy game session, and one that solo gamebooks (and solo video games) simply cannot replicate.

EXAMS. February 14 and April 11. Each student will complete **two (2) in-class exams**, both of which are noted in the course schedule below in **yellow highlighting**. These exams may include a range of identifications, short essay questions, primary source quotations, and visual records based on material covered in class. In grading these exams, I will be looking for evidence that you have incorporated insights and interpretations presented during our class sessions—not whatever you may find about the “immortality projects” or “The Book of Lost Tales” on Wikipedia or other internet sites. Even if such answers are not, strictly speaking, factually incorrect, they do not demonstrate your understanding of the instructor’s value-added analysis of the material under examination and will thus receive a much lower grade. Needless to say, in order to do well on these exams, you must attend every class, complete all the readings, pay close attention to the lectures and class discussions, and take notes—there is simply no substitute for the in-class experience. For each exam, I will provide a study guide on the day of the previous class session. This study guide will include 2-3 times as much material as will actually appear on the exam—but you can rest assured that nothing will appear on the exam that was not also on the study guide. So students who use the study guide to prepare diligently will not encounter any surprises on the actual exam.

FINAL PROJECT: HISTORICALLY INSPIRED FANTASTIC ROLE-PLAYING GAME.
Weeks 14-15.

Before there were video games, the only way to simulate the illusion of participating in alternative worlds other than our own primary reality—for adults, at least—was through: 1) organized religious rituals (since time immemorial); 2) tabletop historical war games (since the 19th century); 3) or narrative adventure fantasy role-playing games (since 1974). The goal of this course is to teach you how to create your very own role-playing simulation of an alternative world that blends all three platforms in this list: religion, history, and fantasy. Using the knowledge and experiences gained over the course of this semester, each student will undertake as a final project their very own attempt to simulate a historically informed fantastic role-playing game in narrative form. What you are trying to do is essentially what Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson did way back in 1974 with *Dungeons & Dragons*: create a set of rules, narrative cues, and modes of resolution for a group of 3-4 people to conjure up an imaginary world through which a fictionalized representation of each player will attempt to complete a journey, quest, or mission filled with imaginative—but in our case, historically inspired—encounters and obstacles. As we will learn in class, the classic iteration of the fantasy role-playing game (forged by *Dungeons & Dragons*) consists of European-inspired medieval backdrops, encounters with supernatural and monstrous forces drawn from Western mythology and religions, and a mathematical system of combat resolution based on numerical modifiers and dice rolls. But this is merely a template, and students are encouraged to adapt both the modes of play and the content of the gameplay narrative to their own interests in fantasy and history. Because this is a history course, students will be expected to infuse fantastic elements into a *plausible historical backdrop*. Most fantasy role-playing games posit an entirely invented world set apart from our own (even if they are ultimately inspired by peoples and places from Earth). But for this course, your role-playing game must exist in a known place and time in the history of civilization on Earth, albeit one sprinkled with fantastic elements inspired by the actual religions, folk beliefs, and mythologies of the people who once lived there—and your portrait of this backdrop must reflect empirical knowledge about that time and place.

To give just one example, let's say that you are interested in the history of slavery in America. A very serious and solemn topic, right? Well, you could create a fantastic role-playing game that simulates the attempt of an African slave on an American plantation to escape to freedom. The historical elements of your game would be drawn from your own research and knowledge on the conditions of slavery at that particular time and place. The fantastic elements could be drawn from several sources, depending on your preference and research: folk tales about supernatural phenomena unique to the location of your plantation in the American South or perhaps fantastic elements drawn from the West African homeland from which the slaves were captured and sold. The mathematical or gameplay elements would be drawn from your understanding of the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing template and those of its many successors (such as gamebooks) that we have examined over the course of the semester.

A less serious but still perfectly acceptable backdrop could be Tokugawa Japan. If you are interested in samurai and Japanese yokai, you could create a gameplay experience that involves the infiltration of a famous feudal fortress like Himeji Castle and is peppered with combat and narrative encounters with culturally specific supernatural entities drawn from popular beliefs in Tokugawa Japan.

Each student will not only have to create the rules, setting, and narrative cues for a fantastic role-playing game, but also (as the so-called “Dungeon Master,” or DM) run a live

hour-long session of that game with 3-4 of their classmates as players. Your instructor will provide a live demonstration of one of his own fantastic role-playing games in class on March 18 in order to give students a sense of what they will be expected to do themselves by the end of the semester. (We will also devote one entire class session to discussion of expectations for the final project.)

In terms of assessment, your grade for this final project will be determined by the instructor's evaluation of two distinct iterations of your role-playing game:

1. Written Iteration

- a) Introduction
 - a. describes the historical and fantastic setting, general rules for the resolution of encounters, elements of character profiles, and item inventories
- b) Gameplay Narrative
 - a. provides narrative text and/or improvisational cues that guide the narration and overall management of the game (including all potential encounters or decision-making opportunities) that may arise during a live performance
- c) Illustrations
 - a. printed images of maps, landscapes, buildings, characters, and items that players engage during the game, either drawn by the student or culled from historical sources

2. Performative Iteration

- a) Live Session
 - a. with the aid of the written materials outlined above, each student will run a single live hour-long segment of their fantastic role-playing game with 3-4 classmates during the last two weeks of the course
 - b. depending on the length of your game, players may not be able to complete the entire adventure in one sitting—if you run out of time, be sure to summarize the narrative conclusion of your game for your players

REPORT ON CLASSMATE'S LIVE RPG SESSION. Weeks 14-15.

During the last two weeks of this course, each student will participate in their classmates' live demonstrations of a historically inspired RPG campaign that was developed for their final project. In order to provide valuable peer feedback to your classmates and demonstrate to your instructor your ability to examine critically the narrative and structural components of a fantastic simulation, each student will write a 750-word critique of one of the RPG session that they participated in. What elements of the game worked well and which ones less so? How could your classmate improve the gameplay experience? What influences from other games that we have studied this semester did your classmate integrate into this one?

MATERIALS TO PURCHASE:

Most of our readings will be available for free either on our Canvas course website (under "Files") or the instructor's personal website (edspace.american.edu/cave17). But the gamebooks we will play are often not available in libraries (or available only in brittle

1980s editions that you cannot—or should not—write on) and are very cumbersome to play in an electronic format. The following list contains the titles of gamebooks and other materials that we will play and discuss in class and which have been reprinted (or printed for the first time) over the past decade in accessible (and mostly affordable) editions. The total cost of all materials listed below will be a little over \$100. With a bit of sleuthing, you can probably find electronic interactive versions or free PDFs of several of these gamebooks online. Please note, however, that all of these gamebooks were designed to be played in traditional book form, with the reader making physical notations in the included Character Sheets with a pencil or pen. Unless it will constitute a financial hardship to obtain your own copies, I highly urge you play these gamebooks the way they were meant to be played—as bound paper in your hands, filled with pencil and eraser marks!

1. Steve Jackson & Ian Livingstone, *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (Scholastic, 2017)
2. Joe Dever, *Flight from the Dark* (Holmgard Press, 2023)
 - a. Also available as a free PDF posted to Canvas.
3. Dave Morris and Jamie Thomson, *Fabled Lands: The War-Torn Kingdom* (Fabled Lands LLP, 2017)
4. Dave Morris and Oliver Johnson, *Bloodsword: The Battlepits of Krarth* (Fabled Lands Publishing, 2014)
5. Victoria Hancox, *Nightshift* (Independently published, 2019)
6. Nikki Valens, *Legacy of Dragonholt* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2017)
 - a. Strictly speaking, this is not a gamebook but rather a solo interactive tabletop narrative adventure that the publishers put in a box largely for marketing purposes. But its core mechanics and narrative structure are nearly identical to gamebooks, and its components could easily be repackaged into a single (albeit large) gamebook. Because this is the most expensive item in this list (about \$40), students may want to explore the possibility of splitting the cost with another classmate or two and sharing the gameplay experience together—though this will require coordination.

GRADING:

All assignments noted in the Course Schedule below *are due before the start of class* on the day for which they are listed. For hand-written gamebook exercises, you should upload a scan or digital photograph of your assignment to Canvas.

The breakdown of your final grade will be as follows:

Exam #1	20 pts. (20%)
<i>Fighting Fantasy</i> Map Grid	4 pts. (4%)
<i>Lone Wolf</i> Decision Tree Chart	4 pts. (4%)
<i>Fabled Lands</i> Adventure Sheet, Codewords, Ship's Manifest	3 pts. (3%)
<i>Nightshift</i> Annotated Map	3 pts. (3%)
<i>Legacy of Dragonholt</i> Character Sheet & Tracking Sheet	3 pts. (3%)
<i>Legacy of Dragonholt</i> Reflection	5 pts. (5%)

<i>Combat Heroes</i> In-Class Participation	3 pts. (3%)
<i>Bloodsword</i> Report	8 pts. (8%)
<i>Dungeons & Dragons</i> Character Sheet	2 pts. (2%)
Exam #2	20 pts. (20%)
Final Project: Performative Iteration	10 pts. (10%)
Report on Classmate's Live RPG Session	5 pts. (5%)
Final Project: Written Iteration	10 pts. (10%)
Total:	100 pts. (100%)

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. **Identify and describe acts, practices, and products of artistic and other creative expressions or of aesthetic interpretations and discuss how they reflect, respond to, or shape their many contexts.**
 - a. In this course, students will identify and trace the evolution of human representations of fantastic worlds and entities across Eurasia over the past several thousand years and learn how to analyze them within their proper cultural and chronological contexts.
 - b. Guided class discussions, weekly gamebook assignments, and two in-class exams will provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their grasp of how and why humans have articulated the existence of alternative fantastic worlds and entities and attempted to simulate engagement with these worlds throughout history.
2. **Describe and analyze the formal and structural components and other creative expressions in at least one discipline or domain, or across a range of disciplines or domains.**
 - a. In this course, we will analyze and compare several different literary and performative modes of fantasy world simulation, including war games, table-top role-playing games, and role-playing gamebooks. Guided class discussions, weekly gamebook assignments, and two in-class exams will allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the internal literary, mathematical, and narrative mechanics of various types of fantasy world simulation models and to identify the cultural and ideological agendas that factored into their production.
3. **Engage in or with creative processes, which could include constructing meaning through the practices and products of artistic or other creative expressions, interpreting the meaning of artistic or creative expressions, practicing divergent thinking, or assessing the aesthetic value of artistic or other creative expressions.**
 - a. In this course, students will learn how to produce their own creative simulations of fantastic worlds by participating in a multiplayer RPG campaign and producing and performing their own historically inspired RPG fantasy campaign. These two immersive projects will build upon guided classroom discussions regarding the creative processes that form the foundation of fantasy world simulations.

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Standards of academic conduct are set forth in the University's Academic Integrity Code. By registering, you have acknowledged your awareness of the Academic Integrity Code and are obligated to become familiar with your rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code. Violations of the Academic Integrity Code will not be treated lightly, and disciplinary actions will be taken should such violations occur. Please see me if you have any questions about the academic violations described in the Code in general or as they relate to the particular requirements for this course. The code is available online at <http://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/index.htm>.

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1

January 14: INTRODUCTION

January 17: EVOLUTION OF FANTASTIC STORYTELLING TRADITIONS

1. **READ:** Patricia McKillip, *Stepping from the Shadows* (1984), ch. 1 (pp. 3–40)
 - a. Today's class session will be the first of several illustrated lectures that traces the history of the fantasy genre as well as attempts in modern times to simulate interactions with alternative fantastic worlds outside of organized religion. Be sure to take detailed notes, as you will be tested on this material on the in-class exam scheduled for February 14. Today's topic will provide a very broad survey of fantastic storytelling traditions in human history, from the earliest days (and I mean *early*!) up through the nineteenth century.
 - b. Your reading for today is the first chapter from noted fantasy author Patricia McKillip's semi-autobiographical book *Stepping from the Shadows*. Before I discovered George R.R. Martin in recent years, McKillip was far and away my favorite fantasy author (that's the beauty of a course like this—I get to impose my favorite authors and works of literature on you!). Today's excerpt isn't taken from one of her fantasy novels, however; rather, it is a fictionalized retelling of an imaginative child who sees fantastic things in the desert landscape—almost certainly a fictionalized version of McKillip herself, as a creative child who would grow up to become one of the first major female writers of fantasy in the 1970s.

WEEK 2

January 21: ROBERT E. HOWARD AND PULP FANTASY FICTION

1. **READ:** Robert E. Howard, "Red Shadows"
2. **READ:** Robert E. Howard, "Queen of the Black Coast"
 - a. Most famous now for his creation of Conan the Barbarian, Robert E. Howard was originally one of the most successful "pulp fiction" writers of the 1920s and 30s—and Conan was only one of his many fantasy creations. Today we will learn about his fairly depressing (but endlessly fascinating) life as well as (more importantly) the various social, political, and cultural influences that inspired his larger-than-life heroic characters and the entire "sword-and-sorcery" literary genre.
 - b. You will read two short stories by Howard that have been selected to give you a sense of the range of his fantastic storytelling repertoire: "Red Shadows" features the wandering Puritan swordsman Solomon Kane, who travels the world looking for evil men to punish (pay attention to his lines of dialogue, which I believe are some of the best in the fantasy genre). The second story is one of Howard's better Conan stories. While reading these stories, please keep in mind that Howard was a product of rural Texas in the early 20th century, and as such his choice of words will sometimes run afoul of modern political sensibilities.

January 24: J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND “HIGH” FANTASY

1. **READ:** J.R.R. Tolkien, “The Bladorthin Typescript,” pp. 28–65 (read notes & appendices)
2. **READ:** J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ch. 1: “Ainulindalë”; ch. 2: “Valaquenta”
 - a. The complete opposite of Robert E. Howard in so many ways, J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy worlds and biography nonetheless shared some surprising similarities with those of Howard. In this session, we will explore the life and influences of the most influential and revered fantasy writer of all time. Be it in the world of RPG gamebooks, video games, cinema, literary fiction, or *D&D*, all roads eventually lead back to Tolkien in some way, whether you like it or not. Today we’ll find out why.
 - b. The two Tolkien readings that I have assigned for today represent the opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of his literary output. *The Silmarillion*, unpublished during his lifetime, was what Tolkien most cared about and lavished the most time on. Fans of Middle-Earth now refer to it as his “legendarium,” in which a serious mythology inspired by Northern European folktales, history, and legends was developed as a substitute for the one that (according to Tolkien) England itself lacked. Contrast the tone and content of *The Silmarillion* with the opening chapter of *The Hobbit*, which was the only sort of fantasy literature that actually sold well for most of his lifetime. We’ll explore the tension between these modes of writing and Tolkien’s regret toward one of them in today’s lecture. (You are actually reading an early draft of the first chapter from *The Hobbit*, not the published one, in which Gandalf the wizard goes by the clunky name Bladorthin and the chief dwarf—later known as Thorin Oakenshield—is named Gandalf. Yes, it’s confusing.)

WEEK 3

January 28: THE CREATION OF *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

1. **READ & BROWSE:** *Dungeons & Dragons Single Volume Edition* (1974)
 - a. The iconic fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* did not emerge out of nowhere in 1974. Several important developments had to take place before the very idea of a “fantasy RPG” could even be conceived. Today we’ll learn all about the various influences—e.g., wargames, the American counterculture, psychological “role-playing” therapy, etc.—that inspired co-creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson to develop, gradually and almost by accident, what eventually became their clumsily named “rules for fantastic medieval wargames campaigns playable with paper and pencil and miniature figures.” We’ll also take a look at the origins of the specific elements of *Dungeons & Dragons* that would become staples of the fantasy genre.
 - b. Your assigned reading for today is a one-volume edition of the original 3-volume booklet set that comprised the first *Dungeons & Dragons* product in 1974. Try to read most of the explanatory text that introduces each section, while browsing the remainder of each section whenever the text gets into the nitty-gritty details of how run the logistics of a session or calculate various statistics and outcomes (which make my eyes glaze

over!).

January 31: FANTASY AFTER *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

1. **READ:** Andre Norton, *Quag Keep* (1978), chapters 1-3 (pp. 7–36)
2. **READ:** Rose Estes, *Dungeon of Dread* (1982), (read/play for 30-45 minutes)
 - a. The cultural impact of *Dungeons & Dragons* since its creation in 1974 simply cannot be overstated. Be it in film, literature, art, or games, the recipe for modern fantasy consumer products bears the indelible imprint of *D&D*, even when new manifestations attempt to rework or subvert it. In this sense, the influence of *D&D* on fantasy and popular culture in general is rivalled only by that of Tolkien himself. This lecture will take a deep dive into how an obscure hobby popular in niche quarters of the Midwest in the 1970s became a global phenomenon with an outsized impact on fantasy literature, film, and games. We'll examine the fertile ground for the reception of *D&D* prepared by the hippie counterculture of the 1960s, the successful attempts to adapt *D&D* to the computer gaming and RPG gamebook market, and the inadvertent free advertising provided for *D&D* by the infamous Dallas Egbert case and subsequent "Satanic panic" of the 1980s.
 - b. Your readings for today are two of the earliest cross-over fantasy products published by TSR, the company created by Gary Gygax to oversee *Dungeons & Dragons* and its related merchandise. *Quag Keep* was the first attempt to write fantasy literature directly inspired by the tropes of *D&D*, while *Dungeon of Dread* is a not-very-good attempt to compete in the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure genre. They both demonstrate the nascent cultural impact that *D&D* would have not only on the gaming industry but on all future fantasy creations across all media.

WEEK 4

February 4: *FIGHTING FANTASY* GAMEBOOKS

1. **PLAY:** Steve Jackson & Ian Livingstone, *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982)
 - a. This is the very first gamebook in the popular *Fighting Fantasy* series. Spend at least 3-4 hours attempting to reach the end of this gamebook, abiding by all the rules of combat outlined in the book. If you die in the first hour or so, start over and try again until you have neared the time expectation. Be sure to make an attempt to map out the underground passages of Firetop Mountain on grid paper as you progress through the adventure—otherwise you will get hopelessly lost and have little chance of completing the gamebook. (This may happen even with a map, but at least you can give yourself a fighting chance!)
2. **BROWSE:** Steve Jackson, *Sorcery! The Shamutanti Hills & The Sorcery Spell Book*
 - a. Another gamebook series published by Jackson & Livingstone soon after the *Fighting Fantasy* series was *Sorcery!*, which incorporates an innovative spell-casting system based on memorization. Read the introductory materials for both *The Shamutanti Hills* and its accompanying *Sorcery Spell Book* (both available in free PDFs) to familiarize yourself with how the spell-casting system works (you don't need to play the actual gamebook, though you may want to browse a few entries featuring the use of magic to see how it works in

practice). Who knows? You may end up adapting this system for your own final project if it includes the use of magic ...

3. **TURN IN:** Your attempt to map your passage through Firetop Mountain on grid paper. It doesn't need to be good or even accurate—it just needs to prove that you spent several hours playing this gamebook and put in a good faith effort to immerse yourself in its world. A quick online search will reveal very polished maps created by other gamebook fans. I strongly urge you not to consult these, as they will ruin the mystery and disorientation that the gamebook is designed to provide its reader. If you must, consult the online maps only after you have completed your own game and produced your own map. Your completed grid map will not be graded on its accuracy, but rather on its earnestness.

February 7: *LONE WOLF* GAMEBOOKS

1. **PLAY:** Joe Dever, *Flight from the Dark* (1984)
 - a. This is the first book in the *Lone Wolf* gamebook series. Unlike with the *Fighting Fantasy* series, this gamebook provides a more linear multi-choice narrative that does not require you to create a map of any sort in order to find your way toward the end. In other words, you should play this gamebook until you reach the end, not merely until you reach a 3-4 hour limit of frustration. If you happen to die—ha ha!—simply devise a penalty for yourself (lose equipment or gold, reduce hit points to “1,” lose a Kai Discipline, etc.) and forge ahead once more. The entire gameplay experience will likely last for about 3-4 hours.
2. **BROWSE:** Joe Dever, *Highway Holocaust* (1988), introduction & rules
 - a. Take a look at the introductory material in the first book of this lesser known four-volume series by Joe Dever, which introduces the use of firearms in a post-apocalyptic world. This will be particularly useful if you end up designing a role-playing game of your own that takes place during the modern age and involves the use of firearms.
3. **TURN IN:** An annotated hand-drawn “decision tree” (also known as a “flow chart”) for any ten (10) consecutive narrative junctures that you encountered in *Flight from the Dark*. Examples of what such flow charts should look like will be posted to our course website. In addition to including entry numbers in your circles or squares, you should also add some text indicating the content and decision options of that entry.

WEEK 5

February 11: *OPEN-WORLD NARRATIVE* GAMEBOOKS

1. **PLAY:** Dave Thomson & Jamie Morris, *Fabled Lands: The War-Torn Kingdom* (1995)
 - a. The *Fabled Lands* series of gamebooks represent one of the most ambitious and boldest experiments in gamebook history: an open-world gameplay system that lacks a clearly defined single narrative or goal. There are both advantages and drawbacks to such a system, but there is no denying its creativity and innovative aspects. I urge you to play this gamebook for as much time as you can devote to it, but at least a minimum of four hours. The most frustrating part of the gameplay tends to take place at the very beginning, when you have few resources or abilities and can die easily. After you clear that initial hurdle, the

momentum really picks up and you will likely experience a liberating feeling unlike that of any other gamebook. If you die, start over and play again until you reach a minimum of four hours—I want you to get a good sense of how it was all put together and how the open-world text-based adventure plays out. (You can also search online for tips on how to survive an early death if this keeps happening to you.)

2. **BROWSE:** Martin Nutch, *Steam Highwayman* (2017)
 - a. This is the only other open-world gamebook that I have been able to find, and this excerpt is a demo version posted online by the creator. It takes the same gameplay system from *Fabled Lands* and applies it to a Steampunk-like world of Victorian England. Spend 20-30 minutes reading through the introductory material and browse through some entries so that you can get a sense of how the open-world gameplay mechanics can be applied to settings outside of traditional medieval fantasy worlds.
3. **TURN IN:** A copy of your hand-filled Adventure Sheet, Codewords, Ship's Manifest for *The War-Torn Kingdom*.
4. ***** STUDY GUIDE FOR EXAM #1 POSTED TO CANVAS TODAY *****

February 14: * EXAM #1 *****

1. **START PLANNING: Multi-player *Bloodsword* gamebook session**
 - a. Between now and March 4, you must arrange a multi-player gamebook session outside of class with 3-4 of your classmates. You can find your randomly generated group of fellow adventurers on Canvas. A detailed description of the *Bloodsword* Report assignment that you will produce as a result of this group activity is provided in the "Assignments" section of the syllabus.

WEEK 6

February 18: NUMBER-LESS NARRATIVE GAMEBOOKS

1. **PLAY:** Victoria Hancox, *Nightshift* (2019)
 - a. You should try to play through this entire gamebook, or, failing that, play for a minimum of four hours. I will provide each student with printed maps of the hospital floors that the author has posted to her own website for use during your playthrough—I found it nearly impossible to play this gamebook without them! What Victoria Hancox is attempting to do represents yet another innovation in gamebooks (and interactive fantasy in general): a role-playing game that does not require the use of dice, statistics, or mathematical calculations. This is not an old gamebook from the golden age of the 1980s, but rather a brand-new innovation developed in recent years as part of the nostalgic revival of gamebooks.
2. **TURN IN:** A copy of your hand-annotated hospital maps that tracks your movement through the hospital complex and records clues and other tidbits of information that you kept track of in order to complete the gamebook.

February 21: *LEGACY OF DRAGONHOLT*, PT. 1

1. **PLAY:** *Legacy of Dragonholt* ("Rulebook," "Character Creation," "Toward New Roads," "Dragonholt Village: Day 1")

- a. Strictly speaking, *Legacy of Dragonholt* is not a gamebook; after all, it comes in a box with several cardboard accessories. I believe, however, that its core narrative structure and material gameplay components are nearly identical to the RPG gamebook genre and that its publisher merely packaged it in a boardgame-style box so that it could charge more money than it could justify for a mere gamebook and could also market it to a wider “tabletop RPG” demographic. But there is no real reason why this could not be repackaged as a very large (or multi-volume) gamebook. As a result, I feel that we should treat it as one of the most ambitious and innovative developments in the history of the RPG gamebook genre. Pay attention to all the new narrative and structural elements that creator Nikki Valens has integrated into *Legacy of Dragonholt*, for example: new twists on stereotypical fantasy character types, new encounter resolution mechanisms, and—easily the most impressive and unprecedented—a way to track the passage of time through the imaginary world presented in this game, with different narrative outcomes tailored to the passage of time. Today we will discuss your experience of the character creation process, the first narrative adventure (“Toward New Roads”), and “Day 1” in the village (go wherever you like within town, but don’t head out on any side quests yet).

WEEK 7

February 25: *LEGACY OF DRAGONHOLT*, PT. 2

1. **PLAY:** *Legacy of Dragonholt*
 - a. Dragonholt Village: Days 2-5, including the side quests “Whispering Leaves,” “Sliver of Silver,” and “Crypt of Kharthuun”
2. **TURN IN:** copies of your hand-filled Character Sheet and Dragonholt Village Tracking Sheet

February 28: *LEGACY OF DRAGONHOLT*, PT. 3

1. **PLAY:** *Legacy of Dragonholt*
 - a. Dragonholt Village: Days 6-7, including the side quest “Terror on the Prairie” and the final narrative booklet “Paper Faces”
2. **READ:** Two interviews with *Legacy of Dragonholt* designer Nikki Valens
3. **TURN IN:** *Legacy of Dragonholt* Reflection
 - a. Please write approximately 750 words reflecting on your *Legacy of Dragonholt* gameplay experience. You should compare it with other gamebooks that we have played thus far, provide your views on its major innovations, comment on the topics highlighted in the interviews we read with designer Nikki Valens, and speculate on how you might adapt some of its core concepts into your own game.

WEEK 8

March 4: THE MECHANICS OF *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

1. **CREATE AND TURN IN:** Your very own original D&D character using pencil and paper, following the instructions provided by your instructor. Your completed

- “Character Sheet” will include two types of information: numerical character statistics determined largely through dice rolls and narrative comments that flesh out a background story and motivation. Upload a copy of your hand-filled Character Sheet to Canvas before class. Make sure you complete this assignment before tackling any of the other tasks for this session listed below.
2. **BROWSE:** *Dragons of Stormwreck Isle Introduction*: “Welcome to Dungeons & Dragons”
 - a. These materials derive from a typical D&D “starter set” that is designed to teach the basics of running a D&D adventure for newcomers. Read the first five pages or so closely, then browse the remainder of this introductory instruction booklet to give yourself a sense of the full complexity of a properly run D&D campaign.
 3. **READ:** *Dragons of Stormwreck Isle DM Guide*: “Running the Adventure,” “Chapter 1: Dragon’s Rest”
 - b. This booklet is for the sole use of the Dungeon Master (DM), who is both referee and storyteller. Read the brief introduction, then continue on through Chapter 1 to get a sense of what a DM actually does in practice.
 4. **WATCH:** “Beginners Play D&D Dragons of Stormwreck Isle” (26:44) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfjnyuxkeuY>)
 - a. This is a fun, short recording of a group of people playing the *Dragons of Stormwreck Isle* starter set in person (you should already have read the written materials for this starter set before watching this video). This is how a live D&D game unfolds by people who know what they are doing—and are having a good time doing it. Think about the relationship between a live *D&D* session and all of the gamebooks that we have played and studied. How are they different and how are they similar? Do you feel that *D&D* actually provides a convincing illusion of engagement with a fantastic world? Why or why not?
 5. **PLAY:** A short AI-generated D&D adventure on the website AI Realm (www.airealm.com; choose the free option). Using AI technology, this website simulates in user-friendly fashion the experience of creating a D&D character and then will walk you through an AI-generated D&D text-based adventure. Spend about 30 minutes or so creating your character and then interacting with one of these storylines so that we can discuss your experience in class. In short, this AI exercise represents a fairly accurate (if rather soulless) representation of the mechanics of a D&D game for a single player. We will discuss the similarities and differences of such technology with the many gamebooks we have already played as well as with the materials and recording for *Dragons of Stormwreck Isle*.

March 7: PREPARING FOR YOUR FINAL PROJECT

1. **READ:** Introductory material for *Himeji Heist* and *Escape from Teotihuacan*
 - a. Today we will go over detailed expectations for your Final Project and how you can best prepare for the work involved. I want you to read the introductory materials that your instructor has prepared for his own historically inspired fantastic role-playing games: *Himeji Heist* and *Escape from Teotihuacan*. Pay close attention to these documents because they are written in precisely the format I expect of you in your final project. When we come back from Spring Break, your instructor will demonstrate his newest fantasy role-playing game in a live session so you can see what will also be expected of you for the

- Performative Iteration of your Final Project.
2. **TURN IN:** *Bloodsword* Report (include copy of hand-annotated Character Sheet)

WEEK 9

March 11: *** **SPRING BREAK** ***

March 14: *** **SPRING BREAK** ***

1. **ADVICE:** Use Spring Break to start thinking about your Final Project and the sort of historical and fantastic backdrops and elements you might want to include. You should also start to think about the various sorts of Encounter Resolution Mechanics that you will need to design in order for your players to progress through your world.

WEEK 10

March 18: LIVE DEMONSTRATION OF ROLE-PLAYING GAME

1. **READ:** Introductory materials for *Soulstealers*
 - a. Today you will watch and take notes as your instructor plays the role of a Dungeon Master for his own historically inspired fantastic role-playing game. Three student volunteers will serve as guinea pigs to join your instructor on center stage. What your instructor does in today's session is exactly what you will be expected to do during the final two weeks of class as part of your Performative Iteration of the Final Project.

March 21: GAMEBOOKS AS PAPER VIDEO GAMES

1. **READ:** "Introduction" and "Rules for a Two-Player Game" in Joe Dever, *Combat Heroes: Black Baron* (1986) and *White Warlord* (1986)
 - a. The *Combat Heroes* series of gamebooks represents the strangest and gutsiest experiment in the history of gamebooks. Likely sparked by a desire to keep up with role-playing video games like *Wizardry* and *The Legend of Zelda*, Joe Dever developed a series of gamebooks that were not only designed to be played by two people, but also recreated in visual form the first-person perspective of exploring a dungeon. Whether it works or not is another matter, but there is no denying the boldness of the experiment. Your goal today is to understand the rules for a two-player game as much as possible BEFORE coming to class. During the class, you will pair off with another classmate and attempt to play the two-player game, which involves outwitting and attacking the other player in a visually recreated dungeon. One student will have to play the Black Baron and the other student will have to play the White Warlord, so it will be best to familiarize yourself with the introductory material for both books (much of it is identical, but not all).
 - b. **Please note:** The in-class participatory element of today's gamebook activity constitutes your "assignment" for this session. In order to receive the 3 pts. allotted for this assignment, you must: 1) be familiar with the rules for *Combat Heroes* and be prepared to participate in a gameplay session—do not show up for class having no idea whatsoever how to play; and 2) participate in a two-player *Combat Heroes* session during class for about an hour. If you are absent from today's class or did not make a good-faith effort before class to understand the rules on how to play, you will not receive credit for this assignment.

Students who find themselves paired with a classmate who obviously did little or nothing to prepare for today's activity should inform the instructor via e-mail after class.

WEEK 11

March 25: TOLKIEN ON FAIRY TALES AND "SUB-CREATION"

1. **READ:** Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"
2. **READ:** Tolkien, "Leaf by Niggle"
3. **READ:** Rateliff, "'And All the Days of Her Life Are Forgotten': *The Lord of the Rings* as Mythic Prehistory"
 - a. Tolkien did more than any other person to articulate the theoretical framework that helped to elevate the fantasy genre from its perception as a form of juvenile entertainment to a serious form of literature. Today we'll see how he did this. On the docket for class discussion are Tolkien's two most famous theoretical articulations of "sub-creation," one in the form of an academic lecture to his peers ("On Fairy-Stories") and the other in the form of a short story ("Leaf by Niggle"). We will also read Tolkien scholar John Rateliff's analysis of the unprecedented narrative and historical depth that Tolkien put into his Middle-Earth, along with how Tolkien viewed its relationship with our own historical world.

March 28: A HISTORY OF MAGIC

1. **SKIM:** *Sixth Book of Moses* (excerpt)
2. **SKIM:** *Picatrix* (excerpt)
3. **READ:** "The Black Arts," *Weird Fantasy* (1950)
4. **READ:** Anonymous Poet, "Sariputra and the Six Masters"
5. **VIEW:** Anonymous Painter, "Sariputra and the Six Masters"
6. **READ:** Ji Yun, "How to Speak a Spell"
 - a. Now we return to the mode of learning we experienced during the first several weeks of the course: historical content mediated through illustrated lectures, all followed with an in-class exam on April 11 that will test your understanding of the material. But instead of examining the history of fantastic storytelling traditions and fantasy gaming, we will now learn about the real history behind some of the common tropes and clichés that appear in the fantasy genre.
 - b. We begin with the concept of "magic." Though many of us think we know what magic is, upon closer examination it turns out that a precise definition is surprisingly hard to pin down. For instance, what is the difference between a Christian miracle granted in response to a prayer and a sorcerer who chants a spell that turns his rival into a pig? What about Buddhist seals that were purported to grant their users invisibility, a transformation that could be used for either good or ill? We'll tackle these sorts of questions in today's lecture, while also surveying the history of "grimoires" (magic books) in both Europe and China. By the end of this lecture, you may actually be *more* confused about what constitutes "magic" than before ...
 - c. You should spend most of your reading energy for this session on "Sariputra and the Six Masters," a Buddhist poem written in the late first

millennium A.D. from northwestern China that narrates a “magic contest” between the Buddhist monk Sariputra and the “Six Masters”—both competing to convert the local king with the superiority of their respective religions. Pay attention to how the “magical” abilities of each side in this contest are portrayed by the poet and whether or not there is any subjective interpretations concerning the legitimacy of their supernatural powers. You should also take a look at the charming and colorful illustration (also from the late 1st millennium A.D. in northwestern China) that depicts Sariputra kicking butt in the magic contest and which illustrates the same activities as are described in the poem. Finally, the short anecdote by Ji Yun, a Chinese scholar from the 18th c., provides yet another interesting perspective on popular perceptions of spells and magic.

WEEK 12

April 1: ELVES, DWARVES, AND HOBBITS

1. **READ:** Tolkien, “Of Mim the Dwarf,” pp. 121–40
2. **READ:** Howard, “The Valley of the Lost,” pp. 269–88
 - a. In today’s lecture, we will learn all about historical discourses and representations of fantastic “little people,” from elves and dwarves to Tolkien’s hobbits. How did perceptions of various types of elves, dwarves, and other little people change over time and what do these changing perceptions tell us about the societies that espoused them? Two stories by Tolkien and Howard that feature little people in starring roles will round out today’s material.

April 4: OLD NORSE RUNES

1. **READ:** Terje Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, pp. 1–19
 - a. From *The Hobbit* to *Baldur’s Gate*, Old Norse Runes are perhaps the biggest cliché in the fantasy genre—there is no better and quicker way to signal to your audience that they are entering a fantastic realm than to include some runes in the storyline, whether or not they actually make any sense from a linguistic or narrative standpoint. Today you will learn about the actual runic script from Scandinavian history: the alphabet (“futhark”), their sounds, how they were written, what they recorded, in what contexts they are found, and how both their forms and content changed over time. So, the next time you encounter superficial deployment of runes in a work of fantasy, you’ll be able to mock it from a position of real knowledge!

WEEK 13

April 8: ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL BESTIARIES

1. **BROWSE:** *Monster Manual* (1977, 1st ed.)
2. **BROWSE:** *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*
 - a. For as long as humans have been inventing imaginary fantastic worlds, we have been populating those worlds with vivid creatures both real and unreal. More importantly for today’s lecture, we have also been

documenting those fantastic creatures of our imagination for literary, political, and cultural purposes. These documentation projects are known as “bestiaries,” or visual and textual compilations of fantastic beasts. We’ll examine bestiaries in medieval Europe, ancient China, and feudal Japan, covering both their actual contents as well as the literary, political, and cultural meanings that people projected onto them over the millennia. And, of course, bestiaries have not gone out of fashion even today, as evidenced by your browsing assignment for today’s class: the first edition of the wildly popular *D&D Monster Manual*, which has been updated many times since and is often read and collected by people who don’t even know how to play *D&D*. You will also browse a Chinese bestiary known as the *Guideways Through Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing* 山海經).

3. *** STUDY GUIDE FOR EXAM #2 POSTED TO CANVAS TODAY ***

April 11: *** EXAM #2 ***

WEEK 14

April 15: *** LIVE RPG SESSIONS (FINAL PROJECT—PERFORMATIVE) ***

1. **CLASS AGENDA:** Five students (“Gamemasters”) will run a live session of their historically inspired fantastic role-playing game with 3-4 of their classmates as players.
 - a. For those students assigned to write a “Report on Classmate’s Live RPG Session” today, please upload your report to Canvas by April 18.

April 18: *** LIVE RPG SESSIONS (FINAL PROJECT—PERFORMATIVE) ***

1. **CLASS AGENDA:** Five students (“Gamemasters”) will run a live session of their historically inspired fantastic role-playing game with 3-4 of their classmates as players.
 - a. For those students assigned to write a “Report on Classmate’s Live RPG Session” today, please upload your report to Canvas by April 22.

WEEK 15

April 22: *** LIVE RPG SESSIONS (FINAL PROJECT—PERFORMATIVE) ***

1. **CLASS AGENDA:** Five students (“Gamemasters”) will run a live session of their historically inspired fantastic role-playing game with 3-4 of their classmates as players.
 - a. For those students assigned to write a “Report on Classmate’s Live RPG Session” today, please upload your report to Canvas by April 25.

April 25: *** LIVE RPG SESSIONS (FINAL PROJECT—PERFORMATIVE) ***

1. **CLASS AGENDA:** Five students (“Gamemasters”) will run a live session of their historically inspired fantastic role-playing game with 3-4 of their classmates as players.
 - a. For those students assigned to write a “Report on Classmate’s Live RPG Session” today, please upload your report to Canvas by April 28.