

CIRCLE OF HANDS: THE ABSOLUTE RUNDOWN

The thing about RPG rules is, everyone wants to know and understand everything all at once. So here you are. This is *everything* about the game in a single massive, semi-ordered data-dump. After this list, everything else in the book is merely procedural explanation and helpful detail.

THE SETTING is called the Crescent Land. Culturally, it's equivalent to 10th or 11th century north German and Baltic Europe – it's not medieval, it's not feudal, and it's not chivalric. I'd say "Dark Ages" except historians don't say that anymore ... screw it, the term applies. Dark Ages fantasy.

THE MOST COMMON technological materials are wood, wrought iron, and leather.

THE ONLY ARMOR used is the mail hauberk, simple shields, and simple helms. No plate armor, no limb armor, no barding for horses, and no body armor at all for most people.

THE CHIEF WEAPON is the spear. Only wealthy people have swords. Regional weapons include the great axe, the francisca, and the chained mace. There are no such things as daggers, longswords, specialized pole weapons, or longbows.

A THROWN SPEAR, or a spear used in a mounted charge, goes right through mail, so look out.

THERE ISN'T ANY heraldry and no knightly culture.

BRACE YOURSELF FOR human horror. It's a time when torture is on hand, power is almost entirely determined by immediate ruthlessness, and no one knows the first thing about hygiene, sustainable agriculture, geography beyond the immediate area, or history besides vague legends.

THERE'S NO EDUCATION. People only know what their family circumstances and limited geographical experience provide.

THE MAP SHOWS an extensive crescent-shaped shoreline, with the ocean to the east. The lands along the water's edge, north to south, are forested Famberge (*fam-BEAR-geh*), mountainous Rolke (*ROLE-keh*), and sea-hugging Spurr, with Famberge also including most of the inland north. The inland to the west is wide, rolling Tamaryon. These are not nations, but subcultural regions within a single culture.

REGIONS DON'T HAVE governments, only local hierarchies based on raw power and immediate history. It's mostly about villages, clans, banditry, fortified strongholds, and families, shaking out into a stratified society based on who has the most wealth – crops, animals, weaponry, connections – with a lot of people being miserable. Petty war among ever-changing alliances is the default condition.

TWO MAGICAL FORCES are at war, black and white. They are savagely effective, diametrically opposed, utterly inhuman, and ultimately destructive, represented by fanatical wizards, and manifested in actual locations. They are stagnating and obliterating the culture.

BLACK MAGIC is called Rbaja (*ur-BAH-ja*), and in its extreme form, taints and scorches the landscape into stinking pestholes filled with undead.

WHITE MAGIC is called Amboriyon (*am-BOR-eyon*), and in its extreme form, gathers in clouds from which angelic beings descend and lead people into what looks like virtue – until it "enlightens" them into amorally perfect form or even erases them from reality.

THE PREVAILING RELIGION of the culture is not centralized, similar to minimally-institutional Buddhism. It is opposed to the magical forces, directed toward steadfastness, endurance, survival, and submission – when it shifts to resistance, it gets crushed.

CANNABIS IS NOT native to the region but is cultivated where possible, and its leaves are dried and smoked in most social situations. Its resinous extract is smoked in religious observances.

THE ROLKE REGION is newly liberated from the magical wars, united under a young king. He has instituted extensive reforms and sworn to defy both Amboriyon and Rbaja – by using white and black magic together.

YOU PLAY CHARACTERS who've banded together to support the young king in Rolke, who opposes both kinds of magic, and you are not only a trained fighter no matter what your social background and prior life, but you use both kinds of magic at once. This group is called the Circle – it's the only one.

THE CIRCLE is the sole institution in the setting with any glimmer of a better life free from the not-so-Cold War between Amboriyon and Rbaja. It's also unique in that no social background is excluded.

ALL PLAYER-CHARACTERS ARE outstanding physical bad-asses. If their background doesn't indicate this, then the Circle trained them up.

THE FICTIONAL CULTURE includes sex and gender bias. Female Circle members, who are armored fighters, are yet another society-challenging innovation of the Circle.

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EVERYONE MAKES UP two characters, and that's the Circle. For any given adventure, you can play any Circle character you want, although not twice in a row. There are no Circle NPCs.

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CHARACTERS ARE DESCRIBED by four attributes, two personality traits, one or more professions, a resulting social rank, a few interesting details, and a Key Event. Other things follow from their professions too.

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THERE'S A SINGLE GM, the same person throughout play. He or she does make up two Circle members at the start, along with everyone else. His or her job after that is to prepare the adventures, play the various other people and foes, and monitor the tripwires that turn a scenario vicious and horrible.

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PLAY DOES NOT concern events at home. The young king and the circumstances of his presence in Rolke are never seen. The characters are played during their ventures.

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VENTURES ARE CREATED using random components and a specialized process to combine and refine them. Ventures include local people with interests of their own and difficult locations. They also include the chance for knowledge, lurking threats, and the fell influence of Rbaja, Amboriyon, or both.

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A VENTURE OFFERS opportunities and resources for the young king, and the characters take these very seriously. It is not a mission; they have no assignment or pre-arranged objective.

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A VENTURE'S OUTCOME for the Circle in general, and for the young king in Rolke, is most likely successful by default. Its purpose in play is to showcase the characters, develop their passions, and bring them to fateful conclusions.

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CHARACTERS IMPROVE MECHANICALLY a little bit after adventures, but change is mostly due to magical effects and significant personal experiences. Leveling-up or its equivalent isn't a major part of play.

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ORDINARY RESOLUTION IS a 2d6 roll + a character's attribute, to equal or beat a 12. For easier or harder rolls, add or lose a d6. That's familiar I'm sure, but the whole fictional context for rolling is pretty different from most games.

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A CHARACTER'S SOCIAL rank and professional background dictate what he or she knows how to do. There is no "common sense" or general resolution.

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IN A CULTURE based mainly on personal confrontation and immediate connections, one might commit murder and grin one's way out of retribution, but there's no way to stop a mob from killing you, outside of magic.

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FIGHTING AND OTHER dynamic conflicts are organized by clashes, a system which emphasizes simultaneity yet preserves individual, make-or-break actions.

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CLASH RESOLUTION COMPARES mutual offense and defense simultaneously, and every exchange gives the advantage to one side or the other.

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WEAPONS' DIFFERENT PROPERTIES are expressed in terms of who gets the advantage die. A knife is a superior weapon to a great-axe if the fight takes place between the sheets in a dark bedroom.

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A KILLED CIRCLE member becomes a wraith and still participates in the current adventure, but is gone after that adventure's conclusion.

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ANYONE MAY SWEAR mighty oaths tapping into black or white magical power. Doing so brings great power and great consequence.

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ALL CIRCLE MEMBERS know a few white and black spells. Your character can also be a full-on wizard, who knows all the spells. Yes, every single one.

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MAGIC IS POWERED by one's own bodily energy. Wizards must be physically very tough, vital people. Magic has no other practical limiting factors – no resolution roll or anything else.

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SPELLS ARE RATED either black or white, with values of 1 to 3. Its value is both the energy it costs and the number of color points the caster fills in.

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A CHARACTER HAS nine slots to fill in with color points, from casting spells or swearing oaths. White points cancel black and vice versa, but if all nine are either white or black, then more magical consequences appear. It's OK to do this, but the effects are permanent. Unlike ordinary wizards, Circle members use this option tactically, not ideologically.

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IT'S TRUE THAT wizards are more powerful and flexible than non-wizards, but the wizards tend to hurt themselves too much to run around unsupported. The two kinds of Circle knights are the same when it comes to plain old spear and sword mayhem.

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FEW NON-WIZARDLY PEOPLE can stand up to a Circle member in open combat, but they do have local social roles and status, whereas the adventuring Circle members are far from home.

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MONSTERS AND DANGEROUS beasts add danger but also pathos of their own, unlike the outright horror of manifestations of Amboriyon or Rbaja. Creatures of Amboriyon are unbearably pure avatars or disastrously enlightened eidolons; creatures of Rbaja are foul, all too cunning undead or insane, disturbing demons.

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NON-CIRCLE WIZARDS ARE always a threat, serving Amboriyon or Rbaja. No one knows if the magical war is due to actual scheming overlords or to the mere accumulation of so many scheming wizards.