



Call No Man Happy Until He Is Dread

Dark Lords in *GURPS Discworld*

by Phil Masters

(Note: This article was, of course, inspired by certain passages in Terry Pratchett's The Last Hero, which is really mandatory reading for anyone inspired by it. And for everyone else, of course.)

While the Discworld isn't exactly a conventional fantasy world, its inhabitants are at least somewhat aware of the conventions of fantasy, and sometimes live by them. Thus, its Dark Lords are, so to speak, the mirror image of its barbarian heroes (as discussed in *GURPS Discworld* and *GURPS Discworld Also*); people who choose to manifest some of the most central, powerful fantasy conventions of all. The two character types aren't so much antagonists -- although traditionally, barbarian heroes do spend a proportion of their time hewing their way across guard-infested throne rooms on the way to ornate raised thrones occupied by scowling figures -- as they are *opposite numbers*, equally idealistic figures who've chosen to pursue a different destiny.

That said, Dark Lords are rather rarer than barbarian heroes, especially late in the Century of the Fruitbat. The fact is, barbarian heroism has the advantage of a certain clear, solipsistic simplicity; any itchy kid can take up a big sword, pull on a loincloth, and set out to carve his way to glory, and some turn out to be good at it (or just lucky). Dark Lording demands focus and a willingness to become a part of society (of a sort). One must (or at least should) recruit dim-witted guards, build a suitably grim and imposing palace and a matching reputation, and even plan for the long term. Or at least the medium term, if one insists on being slightly more realistic.

Plus, well, Dark Lords just aren't as popular as barbarian heroes. Much as they may complain about the psychotic mood swings and perpetual brawling, ordinary folk have a certain cautious respect and sentimental fondness for hero types, and sometimes, well, it turns out to be necessary to hire someone like that to deal with dangerous wildlife or annoying bandits or whatever. Dark Lords may be living up to popular storytelling conventions, but they're still professionally nasty, when all's said and done. They don't get as many girls; they do get angry mobs. For all the cringing minions, it's a lonely career choice.

Still, some people appreciate the dark grandeur of commitment to this role, and there's always some appeal to bossing the neighbors around and ordering annoying tradesmen put to death, so even in this late and decadent age, there's still a few folk out there willing to give it a go. It might even appeal to a few players who want to try something different as a PC.

And Remember, Just Don't Smile: The Dark Lord Code

Let's be clear; we're not just talking about *villains* here. Anyone can be vicious, mean, self-centred, and greedy, on the Disc or anywhere else. If we're going to talk about proper Dark Lords, we have to focus on people who're willing to live up to every part of the image, good and bad. This can be dangerously limiting -- definitely a Disadvantage, in game terms -- but it can have subtle benefits, in a give-and-take sort of way.

For a big example, let's talk about escape tunnels. Any Dark Lord who knows his job understands that a proper palace, castle, or secret hideout *must* have a hidden emergency exit; angry mobs and

lucky heroes are just too commonplace to ignore the threat. Smart heroes and mob leaders understand this rule, too. *Really* smart ones tactfully ignore it. Defeating and deposing foul enemies is cool and profitable; accepting that, by and large, they'll get away is, well, making sure of future employment. These unwritten rules benefit everybody. However, if the opposition don't respect the conventions, neither will the forces of righteousness. Escape tunnels will be blocked up early. You get the general idea.

(Note: Unfortunately, too many mobs and armies *aren't* playing by the rules these days, whatever the Dark Lords do. This is leading to painful attrition in the ranks of Dark Lords. It's very sad, at least from the point of view of traditionalists.)

In **GURPS** terms, these rules can be defined as follows:

Code of Honor (Dark Lord)

-10 or -15 points

You are committed to the pursuit of power and self-satisfaction, but as importantly, to getting there with *style*. Mere triumph is not enough; you have to achieve it in a way that vindicates your approach, and which demonstrates the superiority of your intellect, willpower, and chosen weapons. The principles which you follow may seem selfish, but they are clear and strong nonetheless.

You only break your word in large matters, and in a way which causes your victims to curse your treacherous nature; if you make smaller promises, you will keep them, as of course the destined ruler of the world can afford to do so. Never ignore an insult to yourself, your schemes, or the symbols of your rule; rant a lot at whoever is responsible, and then take a complicated revenge. Always take advantage of strong opponents, but only in dramatic and highly visible ways, and if your victims are "obviously" defeated and helpless, engage in some token gloating and then ignore them while you get on with important matters. Weapons and circumstances should be as unequal as possible; you use hideously overcomplicated deathtraps and ornate, flared, barbed, and smoke-blackened blades, leaving opponents with simple swords and their wits. (Note that this code only really applies between Dark Lords and hero types; disrespect from peasants and the like calls for a sneer and a dismissive use of overwhelming force, not a rant.)

If you are male, you treat women with florid courtesy that obviously overlays a deeply lascivious nature. If you are female, you are slightly more open about your treatment of men, making it clear that you regard them either as fools or as sex objects, and if you're the modern, sophisticated type, your approach to other women has an unnerving breathy slinkiness about it. You also believe in hospitality, providing visitors who aren't yet scheduled for the deathtrap with comfortable lodgings, submissive servants (who should really either be spies or ridiculously easy to subvert), and even a change of clothes.¹

For -10 points, you live by this code, but you don't forget that the point of being a villain is to win, and dying counts as losing in your book; hence, while the Code drives you to a lot of bad decisions, you can claim with a fairly straight face that it's subordinate to staying alive, or that it's a way to ensure a bit of respect from others. For -15 points, you must live by *every* aspect of the Code, at whatever threat to your own life. (Well, backing down when there's a sword at your throat is understandable -- and quite villainous -- but a self-respecting Dark Lord will then immediately start plotting his reversion to type.) Frankly, while the -10-point version makes you look stylish, the -15-pointer makes you look like a bit of a pantomime character. But some people think that there's no point in being a Dark Lord if you don't take it to the limit.

* * *

As another aspect of their Code, Dark Lords generally choose servants of exceptional stupidity. This is partly good sense of a sort -- after all, these people will be treated as completely disposable

when the roof starts caving in and the heroes charge the throne, and it's a lot easier to hire rampant stupidity than it is to inculcate real, to-the-death, fanatical loyalty. For that matter, given the nature of standard Dark Lord personnel relations and organizational risk-management procedures, the hired help really have to be pretty dumb. But mostly, it's *tradition*. When a Dark Lord screams "Am I surrounded entirely by incompetents?" or "Do I have to do everything myself?" -- well, the answers are "Yes" and "Yes." Anything else means that he isn't a Dark Lord; he's just an organization man.

Alert Internet-using gamers will be aware of a document that defines quite precisely how self-respecting Dark Lords should live; the [Evil Overlord List](#). (The discussions of Dark Lord traditions in *The Last Hero* seem to be a pretty explicit tribute to that list, in fact.) It's well worth any player or GM who's planning to play a Dark Lord printing off the list, reading through it carefully -- and then carefully ignoring every word. Remember, full-face helmets are fine fashion statements for guards, extended explanations are a way of demonstrating one's superior intellect, and physically attractive rebels of the opposite sex must all be assumed to be highly susceptible to the Dark Lord's personal charms. Anything less would be a betrayal of generations of tradition, and would take away the whole point of following this difficult and under-appreciated career path.

Anyway . . . Any PC or major NPC who wants to be considered a proper Dark Lord really *must* take the above Code of Honor, and live by the associated rules. Plenty of people who look a bit like Dark Lords don't, but they're *not* Dark Lords; they're just villains. In fact, it can be used in the following:

Born to Ruin: The Dark Lord Template (100 points)

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 11 [10]; IQ 13 [30]; HT 10 [0].

Advantages: Ally Group (2-5 75-point minions, appear 12 or less) [20]; Comfortable Wealth [10]; Fearlessness +2 [4]; Full Literacy [5]; Status +2 [10]; and 30 points from: improved Attributes [varies]; Absolute Timing [5]; Acute senses [2/level]; Alertness [5/level]; Ally (trusted lieutenant, backroom necromancer, etc.; may be Unwilling) [varies]; larger, more capable, or more frequently available Ally Group [varies]; Attractive Appearance [5]; Charisma [5/level]; Clerical Investment [10]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Contacts (spies) [varies]; Cultural Adaptability [25]; Danger Sense [15]; Daredevil [15]; Disease-Resistant or Immunity to Disease [5 or 10]; Enhanced Dodge [15]; Extra Life [25]; additional Fearlessness [2/level]; Hard to Kill [5/level]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Intuition [15]; Less Sleep [3/level]; Luck [15 or 30]; Night Vision [10]; Peripheral Vision [15]; Reputation (as a potential employer, among scum and warrior losers) [varies]; Single-Minded [5]; additional Status [5/level]; Strong Will [4/level]; Temperature Tolerance [1/level]; Voice [10]; Voice of Command [15]; or additional Wealth [varies].

Disadvantages: Code of Honor (Dark Lord) [-10]; and a total of -25 points from increasing the Code to -15 points [-5]; Age [varies]; Albinism [-10]; reduced Appearance [varies]; Attentive [-1]; Bad Smell [-10]; Bad Temper [-10]; Broad-Minded [-1]; Bully [-10]; Callous [-6]; Clueless [-10]; Compulsive Spending [varies]; Compulsive Vowing [-5]; Cowardice [-10]; Cursed (Divine Curse) [varies]; Delusions [varies]; Disturbing Voice [-10]; Dreamer [-1]; Easy to Read [-10]; Enemies [varies]; Extravagance [-10]; Fanaticism (self) [-15]; Fat [varies]; Gigantism [-10]; Glory Hound [-15]; Greed [-15]; Gullibility [-10]; Hunchback [-10]; Imaginative [-1]; Jealousy [-10]; Lecherousness [-15]; Low Empathy [-15]; Lunacy [-10]; Manic-Depressive [-20]; Megalomania (requires Fanaticism) [-10]; No Sense of Humor [-10]; No Sense of Smell/Taste [-5]; Oblivious [-3]; Odious Personal Habit (ranting) [varies]; One Eye [-15]; Overconfidence [-10]; Paranoia [-10]; Proud [-1]; Reclusive [-10]; Reputation (as, well, a big bad person) [varies]; Sadism [-15]; Secret [varies]; Self-Centered or Selfish [-10 or -5]; Skinny [-5]; Social Stigma (Overdressed Foreigner) [-10]; Solipsist [-10]; Sterile [-3]; Stubbornness [-5]; Trademark [varies]; Truthfulness [-5]; Unluckiness [-10]; Vow [varies]; or Workaholic [-5].

Primary Skills: Intimidation (M/A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Leadership (M/A) IQ [2]-13.

Secondary Skills: Riding (P/A) DX-1 [1]-10; Savoir-Faire (M/E) IQ+2 [0]-15; Tactics (M/H) IQ-2 [1]-11; and 4 points in any Combat/Weapon skill or skills of choice.

Background Skills: A total of 7 points in any of Acting (M/A); Administration (M/A); Alchemy (Discworld) (M/H); Appreciate Beauty (M/VH); Area Knowledge (own domains or region or the entire Disc) (M/E); Bard (M/A); Chess (M/E); Detect Lies (M/H); Fast Talk (M/A); Hidden Lore (M/A); Holdout (M/A); Intelligence Analysis (M/H); Interrogation (M/A); Languages to taste (M/A); Occultism: Demonology (M/A); Performance/Ritual (M/A); Poisons (M/H); Sacrifice (note prerequisite) (M/H); Shouting at Foreigners (M/H); Stealth (P/A); Strategy (M/H); Streetwise (M/A); Thanatology (M/H); Theology (M/H); or Traps/TL (M/A).

Notes: If buying Wealth up (and really, high Wealth is obligatory for any Dark Lord above the rank beginner level), don't forget the bonus to Status. Note also that high Status grants a free IQ+2 default to Savoir-Faire skill (factored in above), and that some of the Disadvantages offered carry penalties to skills. A Dark Lord really should have plenty of Quirks, by the way.

One option for an Ally, especially among more *thoughtful* Dark Lords, is an Igor (see **GURPS Discworld Also**, pp.DA60-1). Others include renegade wizards or occasionally witches to provide magical firepower, and burly warriors in really fancy black armor to provide plain muscle or tactical command functions. None of these are mandatory, but a Dark Lord who wants to last a novel rather than a short story will need at least one such assistant, if only for ablative protection.

Merging this template with a wizard template from **GURPS Discworld Also**, or adding ST, DX, HT, and better weapon skills, will make for a truly formidable (and accordingly expensive) Dark Lord who really *can* do everything -- or at least most things -- himself. Of course, the focus needed to achieve high ratings in these other fields rather distracts from proper Dark Lording, and it's generally at least assumed that Unseen University looks askance at graduates who go into the conquest business, but some people manage it.

Darkness on the Edge of Town: The HQ

Every serious Dark Lord dreams of settling down in a place of his own, although to begin with, a certain amount of leading armies in rampages of conquest (or running to keep ahead of heroes, or indeed angry peasants) is part of the accepted career path.

The ideal Dark Lord HQ is of course a looming dark tower, built of cyclopean masonry and with no or only small windows.² However, some Dark Lords develop a taste for underground complexes,³ and others make do with what they can find. After all, getting somebody in to build a proper tower is going to be a long and expensive process, and too many builders are prone to demanding payment in advance, especially when your job specification uses words like "evil" and "threatening" in every line. Thus, until one gets to the level of supernatural oomph which can work up the full flame-illuminated black stone number at a gesture (preferably complete with local external climate and lighting control), it's often easier to take over and adapt existing structures. These then have to be embellished to accepted Dark Lord standards; aside from choice of building materials, there's other things which work well on a budget, such as making as many fixtures and fittings as possible smoke-blackened (using cheap fuel keeps costs *and* lighting levels down *and* smoke volumes up -- a triple win), and maybe inviting a few families of gargoyles to move in and improve the look of the battlements.

That said, a *good* HQ really will feature some quite radically divergent architectural options. For example, most sensible large houses in low-tech societies have stables *outside*, while fortresses have big courtyards where things like animals can be looked after. Dark Lords, by contrast, want **towers**. Plain towers, with no outbuildings to diminish the effect. If they therefore have to keep their Steeds of Doom indoors, well, the smell must be regarded as a small price to pay. And talking of those steeds -- the front door has to be big. When the Dark Lord or his Trusted Lieutenants Ride

Forth, they should expect to be able to do so at an imposing walk if not a full gallop, and preferably three abreast if they want. If that means that they need indefensibly large, vulnerable doors, well so be it.

Despite the budget options, it's clear that, in game terms, a Dark Lord needs well above average Wealth levels, and may have problems until the local peasantry are well and truly oppressed. This in turn leads many Dark Lords who are still on the way up to cut corners -- or rather, to lurk in them, limiting themselves to embarrassingly small secret lairs. This is well enough if they can at least manage one of the aforementioned underground labyrinths, but others play far too dangerously with their own images; a Modest Town House Of Despair really doesn't cut it. This is, at least, one good reason why Dark Lords should go out adventuring; looking for some abandoned ruin which they can convert inexpensively to their requirements sometimes seems like a good plan. The drawback is that they can't always select the location as precisely as they might choose -- sullen remoteness is all very well, but you've got to be within striking distance of worthwhile conquests -- but a smart Dark Lord can adapt.

Interior Decor

Given that the job sometimes involves entertaining -- whether the guests are willing and/or invited, or, more likely, not -- a Dark Lord has to worry as much about the internal as the external structure of his HQ. Vicious and devious traps are, of course, the first concern, but a Dark Lord on the way up will usually discover, after some initial experiments, that it's possible to go too far with these. When one carefully recruits underlings for limited intellect, too many traps with too cleverly refined disarming mechanisms can mean that one loses staff far more rapidly than one actually nails those annoying keen-eyed heroic interlopers. Anyway, a certain style and even restraint in trap design is part of the Code. Anyone can make their home lethally dangerous; it's making it *interesting* that's the challenge.

Low lighting levels are certainly part of the deal -- and also unavoidable, if you've managed to avoid having too many windows -- but other than that, there's really no reason to cut back on creature comforts too far. If the lighting is low enough, visitors are unlikely to notice that your Dark Throne has a nice comfy seat cushion, and anyway, a certain amount of Decadent Luxury is part of the image (unless you're going for the full ascetic Grim And Inhuman Overlord effect, which really does take dedication). As for your staff, well, if you can afford it, they probably deserve some comforts, which may also help to keep them loyal, and may cause them to Go Soft, which is *another* part of the Code in some people's books. Anyway, that brings us on to the next and final section . . .

It's a Death Trap, It's a Suicide Rap: Underlings

Because lastly, it's worth considering those people who form a significant part of the above template, and indeed of the whole Dark Lord ethos; the Minions.

In fact, these tend to come in various levels of competence -- note all the talk about "elite troops" at the climax of many stories involving Dark Lords. The Ally Group included in the template represent a personal following -- the relatively tough guards around the throne who can make a Final` Confrontation scene relatively interesting without the throne room having to be packed to the rafters with disposable thugs. Still, all that's *absolutely* needed is someone to slow the opposition down a little while the Dark Lord gloats and/or makes a break for the secret tunnel (thus escaping to ensure a sequel).

Reasonably successful Dark Lords recruit whole Dark Armies of rather less personal followers, who are merely employees rather than Allies, and who probably have significantly lower points totals. Heroes traditionally chew through these with contemptuous ease, although sheer numbers can be a problem after a while. They can be represented with standard **GURPS** "minor character" stats -- say ST 11, DX 10, IQ 8, HT 10, and a couple of weapon skills at around 12. For the elite,

personal following, however, it's worth offering a more detailed character sheet:

Dark Lord Minion (75 points)

Attributes: ST 13 [30]; DX 12 [20]; IQ 9 [-10]; HT 12 [20].

Advantages: Either Combat Reflexes [15] *or* any one of Alertness +2, Extra Hit Points +2, Fearlessness +5, High Pain Threshold, Night Vision, or Toughness (DR 1) [all 10], plus any one of Collected, Deep Sleeper, Disease-Resistant, Full Literacy, or Rapid Healing [all 5].

Disadvantages: Duty (to the Dark Lord, 12-) [-10], plus any one of Bad Temper, Bloodlust, Bully, Clueless, Confused, Easy to Read, Gigantism, Gullibility, Impulsiveness, Indecisive, Intolerance, Jealousy, Literal-Minded, No Sense of Humor, Odious Personal Habits (-2 reactions), Overconfidence, Self-Centered, Selfless, Social Stigma (minority group or overdressed foreigner), Solipsist, Struggling, or Ugly [all - 10].

Quirks: Add two to taste; common choices include things like "Thinks he's a real ladies' man," "Addresses all opponents as 'Scum,'" or Alcohol Intolerance (see p.CI79). [-2]

Skills: Axe/Mace-12 [2]; Blackjack-12 [1]; Brawling-12 [1]; Broadsword-12 [2]; Gambling-8 [1]; Interrogation-8 [1]; Intimidation-10 [3]; Knife-12 [1]; Polearm-11 [1]; Riding (horse)-11 [1]; Savoir-Faire (Military)-9 [1]; Scrounging-9 [1]; Shield-12 [1]; Spear Throwing-12 [1]; Streetwise-9 [2]; Survival (any one terrain type)-8 [1]; Tactics-7 [1].

According to the precise nature of the Dark Lord and his organization, GMs might like to adjust the Duty (quite possibly making it Extremely Hazardous), or even switch it for a Sense of Duty if the follower is actually motivated by some kind of personal loyalty rather than simply having blundered into this job and lacking the sense to get out. For that matter, an unusually sentimental Dark Lord might represent a Patron (or an Ally, depending on points levels); arguably, anyone with an Ally Group is in this position towards its members, but it was left off the minion character sheet as just being too contrary to the Dark Lord ethos. And yes, Dark Lords are forever losing experience bonuses for betraying their Ally Groups. It beats dying alongside them.

Successful Dark Lords, with rule over substantial territories, grant their minions 10 or 15 point Legal Enforcement Powers, and probably a bit of Status. This can all help raise the Ally Group members' points values to 100 each; upgrading the Advantage is all part of getting on in the Dark Lord business. (Conversely, minions whose Dark Lord tries too hard can gain Enemies, which can balance any points gains.)

Note also that this is merely a typical, "general purpose" follower.⁴ Players and GMs should feel free to rearrange the design and even come up with completely new character concepts, covering, say, burly, sadistic, but gullible jailers, swift-footed messengers with no sense of self-preservation, deeply unprepossessing spies, minor Trusted Lieutenants who can actually go one-on-one with a hero for a reasonable time, and so on.

As all the above should make doubly clear, proper Dark Lords recruit for stupidity; it reduces the dangers of excess ambition or refusal to obey suicidal orders, and generally fits with the Code. In fact, the hard core of the profession pride themselves on the dumbness of their minions. It is possible to find people with functioning brains in the service of a Dark Lord, but they'll usually be rated as Trusted Lieutenants rather than underlings. At best, they can be treated as individual Allies, and given character sheets not that unlike a Dark Lord themselves, or a modified version of something out of *GURPS Warriors* or maybe *GURPS Wizards*; perhaps more common, however, is the ambitious type. Just because a Lieutenant is Trusted, doesn't automatically mean that the trust is justified. Entry into the profession of Dark Lording can be difficult, and sometimes, an *ad hoc* apprenticeship ends rather sooner and more messily than the mentor intended.

Family: Another variation on this theme appears when a Dark Lord not only stays in touch with his family, but gets on well enough with them to let a few of them stay around the Dark Tower. Sometimes, this means a cackling crone-witch of an aunt in some side room (reserved, pleasant-featured aunts, with or without magical talent, would be letting the Code down), but any Dark Lord with long-term ambitions will really want children -- and a few somehow manage it. Sons, unfortunately, seem to slip into the Unwisely Trusted Lieutenant role with appalling ease; being brought up by someone with lousy parenting skills, who nonetheless convinces you that you're an Heir To Power, is doubtless bad for team spirit and moral sense. Daughters, who traditionally take after their mothers for looks (save that they may inherit their father's tendency to darkness, at least in hair color), are prone to the Convent Schoolgirl Stereotype problem; being sheltered and spoilt, they fall for the first well-built male hero who walks through the door, and things go downhill from there. Ah well, at least it's in accordance with the Code.

Non-Human Minions: Most Dark Lords are equal opportunity employers (except in the matter of intelligence); they rather pride themselves on hiring the scum of every community on the Disc. Dwarf minions are rare, but highly valued for their bullet-headed robustness; they can be trusted to obstruct any onrushing heroes for just that crucial moment longer. In game terms, you can add the dwarf racial package to the above character sheet, which costs a net 18 points as it comes complete with Axe/Mace skill at DX, and then find another -18 points in Disadvantages from somewhere. (It's not hard; just pull a couple more off the options list.)

Troll minions are even more pleasing, on the surface, being blessed with vast natural stupidity and resilience, but trolls sometimes have a certain rock-headed common sense which makes them surprisingly tricky to employ. Still, plenty of Dark Lords have worked well with trolls. In game terms, trolls have to be bought as individual Allies or, at a pinch, as members of a 100-point Ally Group; if you're in a hurry, use the "Hick Troll" template on p.DA60 of *GURPS Discworld* Also as a model for the latter.

Undead and other creatures of the night also have a traditional place as minions (especially for Dark Lords with magical talent or a theological bent) and a high points cost. Vampires are more likely to go into the Dark Lord business themselves than to serve others (and werewolves really wouldn't get on with Dark Lords, by and large), but zombies (see pp.DA29-31) are, well, made to serve. The snag, again, is the high points cost, which may be reduced by piling on the Disadvantages (zombies do lose body parts rather easily), but not usually much below 100 points, if that. Lastly, a really good Dark Lord HQ may have some Gargoyles (see pp.DA25-6), as already mentioned, and might feature a Bogeyman or two (pp.DA22-3) in the cellars or under the stairs, but those are more in the nature of free-willed and independent-minded architectural features than sidekicks.

¹ Your guest wardrobe tends to have a lot of black leather or metallic swimwear; you *know* that guests will appreciate this.

² Basalt or obsidian are considered the best choice of stone, although they cost a mint and are a pain to work; use of black cladding over more mundane structural minerals is frankly tacky, but if the cowed peasantry don't get close enough to see, well, where's the harm?

³ Although these seem to attract a certain class of hero like wasps to open jam jars, almost always in small mixed parties of thugs, kleptomaniacs, god-botherers and UU rejects, for some reason.

⁴ Who can put up a tolerable fight with whatever weapons come to hand rather than being really useful with any of them.

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