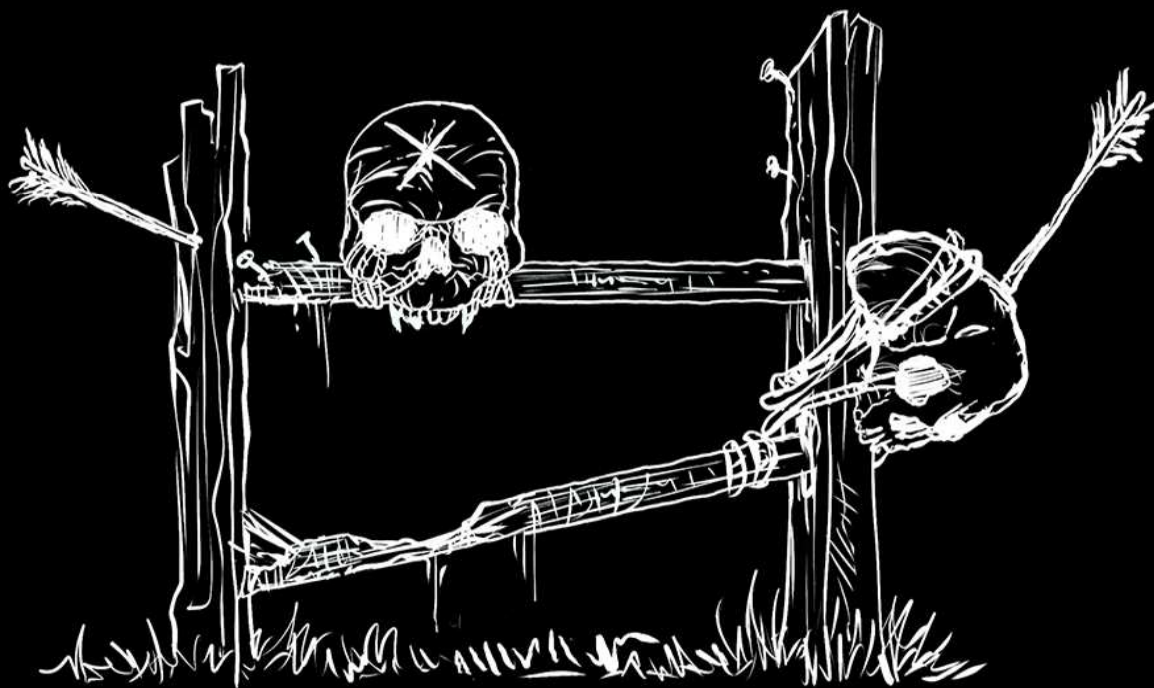


Dark Fantasy

SETTINGS



Eric Diaz

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What is this book about?

This book is a collection of dark fantasy setting ideas. These settings are full of danger, decay and despair. You can flesh out any of the settings further and use them in your games, or just take a few concepts and apply to your own fantasy worlds. You can also use this book to generate settings for stories, comic books, etc.

The focus is on dark fantasy tropes: flawed heroes, terrible villains, corrupting magic, ominous ruins and damned wastelands.

Although this is mostly a system-less book, it is especially suited for medieval dark fantasy games, such as my own ([Dark Fantasy Basic](#)).

What is next for Dark Fantasy Basic?

If you want to know the future of the Dark Fantasy series, here is the deal. We already have a players' guide, and the collection of tables for DMs is nearly complete. Soon, we will publish a big, multi-system book about monsters. Once all this is complete, we will check if there is enough interest to publish a complete book... The ultimate Dark Fantasy OSR/Contemporary game! Stay tuned!

Credits

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You can find more of my work in my blog: methodsetmadness.blogspot.com.

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The world is dying

Dark fantasy settings are many and full of variations. From empty wastelands to endless cities filled with millions desperate souls, any setting can be turned dark with a few twists. One useful way to look at dark fantasy settings is thinking of what they lack. Like a ring, these settings are defined by the huge hole they have in the middle. There is something missing in this setting – maybe it has no deities, or not enough food and water. Maybe civilization is lost and we are living in its ruins. Maybe the children are too few and humankind will die in a couple of generations.

One popular variation is The Dying Earth (named after the book by Jack Vance, although the idea itself is much older). The sun, the plants, or the world itself is dying for some reason. There is virtually no hope. All the characters can do is “rage, rage against the dying of the light”, in the words of Dylan Thomas.

The end can be melancholic instead of apocalyptic. Humanity could survive the death of magic, for example, but the world would slowly lose its color until it is no longer a viable fantasy setting. In most cases, however, the world is doomed to destruction, and humankind will perish with it.

Another possibility is that the world is damned not because of what is lacking, but because of something inside of it – a Dark Lord who conquered all realms, titanic monsters that roam the land, and endless horde of undead, etc. Although monsters, undead and dark lords are common in all fantasy settings, in dark fantasy settings they can become ubiquitous. No longer a simple menace to an ordinary world, they already won, and humankind lives in small islands of light in a vast ocean of darkness and fear.

You can also combine both ideas to generate a modicum of hope. Yes, the world is dying, but only because the Dark Lord sits on the Eternal Throne. If someone somehow would be able to kill it, the world could be saved. Alternatively, maybe the land is full of starved cannibals since the sun disappeared and all plants died, but if someone would venture into the bowels of the world to slay the undying worm, the sun (or what is left of it) would be found in its belly.

Even if there is no hope for the world, there should be some hope for the characters. They cannot save everyone, but they might save a few. The earth is lost, but you might find an oasis. Peace and justice are impossible in a greater scale, but there is always some chance of vengeance. Living to fight another day is already a significant victory.

The apocalypse might also be limited. Maybe characters must survive the fall of Atlantis, and while their homes are lost forever, there are dozens of young, barbaric kingdoms to explore. Who knows? Maybe Atlantis deserved its fate... and now their former masters want to take the rest of the world to build a new wicked empire with the eldritch knowledge of the fallen one.

Notice, however, this are just ideas for settings, and not all dark fantasy adventures have to take place in dying or destroyed worlds. You can have dark fantasy stories taking places in ordinary fantasy worlds (our even in our own world, with a few fantastical twists). The difference is the tone. There are innumerable ways to establish something as dark fantasy, and the setting is only one of them. The other books in my Dark Fantasy series describe characters, magic, religion (including deities), etc.

In the next page, you will find a couple of tables about what might be missing from the world... and what might be destroying it. Combine them at will, or roll more than once or twice to create world with lots of scarcity and trouble.

d20

What is missing?

1	Gods. They died, left, became corrupted, etc. (see the “Dark Fantasy Religion” book for more ideas)
2	Water. In this deserted world, human life is cheap and water is expensive.
3	Food. Everyone are starving, and the number of cannibals is growing.
4	Sun. The sun is dying. It might have turned red already.
5	Light. It is always night, and torches are scarce.
6	Heat. This winter is harsh and lasts for decades. The whole world is covered in snow.
7	Civilization. Civilization has fallen, and barbarians live amongst the ruins.
8	Technology. The primitive humankind cannot tell the devices of the ancients from magic.
9	Sight. The whole world is surrounded by fog. Hard to see, easy to get lost.
10	Magic. The slow death of magic will bring doom upon the world.
11	Metals. Metals are scarce. Wood, bone and obsidian are used in its place.
12	Memory. Everyone seems to be forgetful, and the old ways are falling into oblivion.
13	Empathy. It is every man and woman for themselves now, and the devil take the hindmost.
14	Order. Nobody is in charge, and everything is permitted.
15	Transport. There might be peace somewhere, but no ways to get there.
16	Sanity. Everyone is crazy, but each in their own way.
17	Stability. Everything changes rapidly. Cities move around. Buildings grow and collapse like trees.
18	Souls. Most common people are born with no soul, although this isn’t always obvious.
19	Exit. No one can leave The Great City. Beyond the walls is hell, or worse.
20	Hope. Everything is going downhill, and nobody cares.

d20

What is destroying the world?

1	A never-ending war between irreconcilable forces, none entirely good or evil.
2	A mysterious growing void in the edges of the world.
3	The shambling hordes of undead infecting the population.
4	Monstrous titans that eat people and cannot be reasoned with.
5	Evil sorcerer kings that want to enslave the whole world.
6	A corrupted form of fire that burns places and people from within, and covers the world in ash.
7	Dangerous poison spreading in the water and food.
8	The mutation that affects beasts and monsters started warping humans.
9	A strange disease , too difficult to contain.
10	Highly addictive drugs that make people see into other worlds... and they will eventually gaze back.
11	Unnamable, inconceivable abominations coming from another plane (or planet).
12	Mighty dragons ruling the sky and ruining the land.
13	Evil demons bent on corrupting or dominating humankind.
14	A sinister cabal pulling string from the shadows.
15	A warlord that joined bandits and barbarians under her banner.
16	Unstoppable clans of evil humanoids (goblins, dark elves, etc.)
17	The war against the Dark Lord is finished, and he has won.
18	An evil deity (or a vengeful one) who came down to destroy the world.
19	Continuous natural disasters have rearranged maps and thrown nations into chaos.
20	The veil is broken. Now ghosts interact with the living, or parallel realities collide.

Dark Fantasy vistas

If you need a quick overview of an entire region or nation, here are a few ideas (roll 1d8 if you want urban environments, or 1d12+8 if for wild environments). If you want to create one particular building, place, etc., check my book “Dark Fantasy Places”.

d20	Vista	d20	Vista
1	Fetid slums	11	Infinite caves
2	Decadent city-state	12	Cracked tableland
3	Ruined mega-castle	13	Active volcano
4	Hillbilly village	14	Poisonous swamp
5	Skyscraper tower	15	Crumbling mountain
6	Buried city	16	Barbarian wilderness
7	Labyrinthine streets	17	Living forest
8	Massive walls	18	Dinosaur jungle
9	Drowned lands	19	Land of ice and snow
10	Haunted woods	20	Weird zone of unreality

Factions

Factions are useful for many settings. In dark fantasy ones it is often difficult to find out who the good guys are. Roll a few times in this table to define the main factions of your setting. The roll 1d6 to see how they relate to each other (if they are related at all). While some relations might look obvious (for example, a decadent civilization fighting unruly barbarians), there is always space for creativity (a decadent civilization hiring unruly barbarians to fight religious fanatics, etc.)

d20	Faction	d20	Faction
1	Religious extremists	11	Evil cults
2	Arrogant nobles	12	Murderous mob
3	Decadent civilization	13	Unruly barbarians
4	Aseptic fanatics	14	Diseased masses
5	Honorable dictators	15	Opportunistic demagogues
6	Bloodthirsty witch-hunters	16	Demonologists healers
7	Greedy merchants	17	Crooked philanthropists
8	Violent wardens	18	Stealthy thieves
9	Secret lycanthropes	19	Grim monster-hunters
10	Amoral mercenaries	20	Roll twice and combine

d6	Relation
1	Nemesis. The factions want to destroy each other.
2	Adversarial. The factions are enemies.
3	Competition. The factions want the same resources (land, gold, etc.).
4	Alliance. The factions are working together towards a common goal.
5	Servitude. One faction controls another.
6	Complicated. Roll twice, and combine. There might be deception involved.

Destroying your setting

You do not need to create an entire setting to run your campaign. Instead, you can just get an existing setting... and destroy it. Change the names as needed, and give history and geography a vicious overhaul. You can even use the existing world if you want. There are many ways to inject dark fantasy into an existing setting while still being (somewhat) faithful to the original material. We discuss some of those below.

The Mythic Past

Many settings have mythic ages of Dark, Chaos, Heroes and Monsters, that preceded a great event, often a war or other cataclysmic event, which in turn brought the world to its current state. Even in the real world, the mythic past is full of disorder, strife, gigantic monsters and epic heroes. Set your campaign in a time “before the great flood”, “soon after the fall of Atlantis” or something similar, when the current civilizations were not around and mythic monsters roamed free.

The Grim Future

Traditional fantasy settings often have dark lords, dangerous monsters and mysterious dooms waiting around to destroy the world. Only the chosen hero of light can stop the looming threat! Well, the hero has failed. Maybe evil sorcerers have summoned the unspeakable, and it killed them, and the whole world around it. Maybe the dark lord conquered all, and when he was finally slain it was too late – there is not much left to save. You can hide the truth from the players at first, if you think they will like finding hints about a past that is more familiar than they originally thought.

The Apocalypse, Now

The campaign can also start immediately after all hell breaks loose, or before that. If the group is up for it, let them see the world being destroyed before their eyes. Let them save the ones they can and organize resistance movements to drive back the invaders. If, after that, they can manage to somehow gather the strongest heroes in the land and defeat whoever is in charge of the enemies, great! But most heroes will die in battle, knowing the villain’s minions are all over the land causing havoc. If the forces of chaos are too strong to be stopped, let them know that the destruction of the current world isn’t the end, but the beginning of the adventure.

Setting ideas

As you've seen above, Dark Fantasy isn't necessarily defined by a dark setting... but it helps! Here are a few ideas to get you started. They all have some common elements of dark fantasy (flawed heroes, corruption, monsters, scarcity, etc.). You can use them separately, combine them, or meld them into your own setting. These are not complete settings, but quite literally setting ideas you can develop as you wish.

The absence of gods

The rapture has come. The gods left, and with them the righteous. The rest of the universe was found wanting, and was abandoned. The problem is, nobody remembers it.

Humankind has a hole in their souls, but they don't know why. There is no memory of the gods – the whole concept is alien. Altruism is almost unknown. Needless to say, there are no clerics or paladins, only different kinds of sorcerers. Temples are all fallen and desecrated – to most people, they look like ordinary ruins.

Demons are common throughout the land, but have no lower purpose other than gaining power, pleasure and gold. The word “demon” has lost its meaning. Humans treat them like a dangerous different people – the strong ones should be avoided (or worshipped, as the grant gifts), but some can be reasoned with, enslaved and even breed with humans. They also have no memory of the gods.

Bizarre monsters are also common. With no concept of natural order, there is also no separation between animal and monster. They are all bizarre beasts. No one cares to catalogue them, and everyone knows you cannot predict what kind of creature you will find in your travels.

The most dangerous creature in these lands, however, are the Nephilim. Nobody knows that they are the angels that failed to save this world from judgement and damnation. These ancient, immensely powerful beings have a few clues and recollections on what happened before... However, none dare see the whole picture. Some gouged their own eyes out to avoid seeing how damned the lands have become. Others chained themselves for fear of destroying everything, or twisted their own limbs into tentacle aberrations. Many disfigure themselves to avoid the pain of remembering they were created in the image of perfection, while others carved their guilt into their own flesh. All became insane.

Maybe, if someone could put all the pieces back together, they could pray for one of the gods to look back on this damned world...

Rise of the Titans

The ships came from the unknown lands of West, and with them the Titans. Some sailed, some flew, some came walking from the bottom of the sea. Their masters, the pale Immortals, with half-human armies, waged war against all kingdoms, conquering one by one while they had no time to react.

Eventually, an alliance was made: all the remaining realms joined forces to fight back. The greatest heroes of the time rode on, fearlessly. Most died screaming minutes after seeing a Titan. Some ran away in fear and hid as they could. Champions, nobles and soldiers became bandits, mendicants, hedge knights and guerrillas. Some flipped sides.

The Immortals took control of all but the smallest kingdoms, building huge city-states and dividing the land amongst themselves. They ruled with iron fists, enslaving thousands and slaying those who resisted, but mostly kept to their dark castles, letting their heralds do the talking and tax collecting.

Once the conquering was over, the Titans went to sleep. With nobody to defy the new rulers and most weapons forbidden for anyone but their allies, the land soon became peaceful. There were still monsters in the countryside, suspiciously similar to smaller versions of the Titans, but the Immortals would allow monster hunters to sell their services. The land became dark and twisted in unnatural ways, and some people showed signs of corruption – still, the crops seemed supernaturally plentiful, and the slaves always had enough meat (of unknown origin) to eat.

The realms prospered, in a way – but there was no hope for freedom. Until, one day, the Titans awakened.

Nobody is sure how the chaos started. The Immortals had a firm grip on their Titans from the beginning, but something changed. It seemed to begin almost at the same time, with no more than a few weeks difference from one place to another. The great cities were engulfed in flames, poisonous clouds or acid rain. Most were destroyed; a few are still burning to this day. Even in the places where the gates were kept shut, thousands tried to flee from the devastation. Most of them died horribly.

Refugees swarmed the land, telling stories about Titans breaking free from the clutches of the Immortals. The rule of the Immortals crumbled. Some heralds tried to maintain the order, but most had to abandon their homes, either because they were too close to the cities, or because mobs would come in the night to burn them alive. The ones that decided to investigate what happened never returned. Petty lords moved quickly against each other to vie for better positions, only to realize they could barely control their own soldiers and peasants anymore.

No longer contained in the cities, corruption seemed to spread even further amidst starvation and despair. Hordes of unholy creatures burst from the ruins and nearby villages. Fear and paranoia escalated as people realized they could become warped themselves. Few would dare to venture into the ruined cities, for fear of finding the remnants of the Immortals, or worse, a murderous Titan. But some would...

Tyranny has ended. The apocalypse has just begun.

The gothic world

It is always dark in the gothic world. Even during the day, the sky is full of clouds, and it rains more often than not. Dark, sour plants survive somehow - enough to feed the cattle, at least.

If a central government exists, it is far and does not seem to care. Most people live in sparse villages, with high palisades and boarded windows. The villagers are suspicious, and often cowardly, depressed, oblivious and conniving. Everyone has a secret to hide.

There are no great cities, armies or even true kings. The only local authorities are petty nobles and elected mayors. The church has some power, but no strict hierarchy or centralized power. These authorities are not immune to corruption and infiltration.

The woods are haunted by mischievous fairies and the undead. The old castles are home to ghosts and vampires, and the roads are the hunting grounds of werewolves. Tentacled aberrations lurk under the sea. The damned blood of these creatures also runs in the veins of some otherwise ordinary people, bringing gifts and curses.

Well danger is near or when the moon is full, people retreat back to their homes, boarding doors and windows, hoping to survive until the next dawn. The walls can protect some villages – but, sometimes, the worst evil is within the walls.

However, there are always those who fight back against the darkness. Some do it out of duty or faith. Others, for revenge. There is even good coin to be gained by saving villages and plundering ancient castles. And a few want to dig deep into the darkness, hoping to become as powerful as the terrors that haunt these lands.

Under a blood red sun

When the sun became red and swollen, and the Earth began to die, astronomers and philosophers from all corners of the empire gathered to find the reason why. Before they could reach a conclusion, the starving mobs torn the empire to pieces and killed every intellectual who could not defend himself. Civilization quickly regressed into barbarism. Hunger left no place for abstract thought.

The red sun killed most known crops. Plants became dark and twisted. Water became poisonous. Animals became extinct while new species rose. Mankind itself changed, becoming stronger... and stranger. Many mutants were slain in the cradle. People developed deformities and powers, both physical and mental. Entire new humanoid species were created.

As people dwindled, the warped deserts and forests become home to monstrous beings. Fortunately, the flesh and blood of some monsters could be used for sustenance. Theirs bones and skin became weapons and armor for hardened warriors, and their viscera became instruments for haruspices and magicians.

Eventually, a new order emerged from out of the chaos. City-states were built near the remaining sources of food and water. Nomadic hordes went from place to place looking for sustenance. Warlords became new emperors in their petty domains. Rudimentary weapons and tools were forged – instead of merely scavenged.

The survivors live on the remains of old civilizations they do not fully understand. History was forgotten. Maybe the Ancients were powerful sorcerers draining the sun, or a star faring people who accidentally came to a doomed planet. It hardly matter by this point.

Technological artifacts became like magic, and magic – or anything resembling it – is feared. Resources are scarce. There is little water, and even less food. Fortunately, the near-extinction of humanity seemed to bring some respite to the dying planet, and nature slowly began to occupy the empty spaces. Unfortunately, humanity could take ages to do something about the sun... if it survives at all.

But fixing the sun is not on the list of priorities. In this savage land of blood and sand, every creature must fight for its own survival or perish.

The living hell and other planes

The ultimate dark setting is hell itself.

For example, the characters (or the entire world) could have died and now they must face the ordeals of hades in order to avoid falling even further. They soon find that, even in hell, you can always go deeper.

Their bodies are just pale echoes of the original ones, made of ectoplasm or other strange substances. Effectively, it is their souls made manifest. They can withstand great punishment and pain, but they still function more or less as expected. The ectoplasmic flesh of former mortals is coveted by demons and devils. You could always ally with other humans, but keep an eye open... Everyone is in hell for a reason!

Hell is not the only nightmarish realm, of course. There is also... nightmares, for example. Maybe the world is just a dream from insane gods. The characters were never alive, never real – and they know it. Waking the dreamer could bring them freedom, or doom them all. Or maybe the entire world is trapped in a collective dream, with no clear way out. Die within the dream, and your body perishes, with all your thoughts and memories.

The abyss, limbo, the dreamlands, the lands of shadow... The possibilities are endless. The important thing in these settings is that the world is entirely supernatural and not entirely comprehensible. The usual laws of physics do not apply. Even logic and causation are unreliable, although some internal coherence is expected.

When you use a “nightmare world” as a setting, define what types of rules apply.

Maybe the “ethereal” bodies will always rise again, in eternal punishment. There might be no need for food or water, but permanent hunger and thirst. Maybe each “death” has a cost – your form becomes corrupted until you turn into a demon, or your souls fades, losing memory after memory, until oblivion. Perhaps distances are irrelevant – focus your attention on some place, and you’ll be there. Just be careful about what has eyes on you... In this place, you cannot hide, and running is meaningless. Or maybe time itself is irrelevant, and you must live the same situations again and again until you find a way out – like levels within a videogame, or a recurring dream.

You do not need to spend an entire campaign in these damned place, of course. Maybe the characters live in a physical world and must to descend to hell or travel to different planes in order to accomplish a goal. Alternatively, they think their strange world, with magic, dragons and resurrections, is an “ordinary”, “real” place – until they slowly begin to realize that things are not what they seem to be.

The vanilla twist

Instead of using one of the options above, you can give a “dark fantasy” feeling to a setting without destroying it. Just take a few elements of a “vanilla” (i.e., predictable, familiar) setting and give it a dark twist. This is not hard to do, and is becoming increasingly common (and popular) in games, movies, literature, etc.

Take fairy tales, for example. There are already plenty of dark elements in the stories (especially if you go to the original sources): evil stepmothers, man-eating wolves, witches, dragons, curses, poisoned apples, etc. However, these are expected. Ask yourself about the assumptions in these stories. Why and how does a woman live with bears, a dangerous beast, or seven dwarves? Why do people eat pork in a world where pigs can talk? Why does a man feel the need to kiss a defenseless woman laying still inside a glass coffin? How can people lay still like corpses for many years and rise again as if nothing has happened? I am sure vampires and swindlers are the least extreme examples that come to mind. You can read things like *The Witcher*, *Wicked*, and *Fables* for other examples.

The same process can be applied to chivalric romance, heroic fantasy, etc. What if knights and nobles are bastards, and actual bastards are noble, like in *A Song of Ice and Fire*? What if elves are not only racist, but bioengineered survivors of a curse that let them sterile? What if all those goblins were just defending their homes after all?

I know, I know, you’ve already heard of this many times. Which brings us to the huge caveat when doing this. If you twist each and every element in a setting, things quickly become stale again. If all damsels in distress are liars, all elves supremacists, and all dragons poor victims of society, you might be creating a setting that is not only predictable but also lacks the familiarity... Which is the worst of both worlds.

Balance is hard to find, and the “vanilla twist” is one option. Which means: keep most things familiar, but show there are cracks in the structure. If a religion or political system exists for centuries, it means it probably has some good in it, although it can become corrupted, sometimes suddenly. In addition, there is good and evil in all kinds of creatures, but a dragon that eats people with no ill intent is still dangerous.

Dark fantasy is not about subverting expectations, but adding shades of (dark) gray in many things that look simple. Remember to add some (moral) complexity not only to the “light” side of the story (i.e., flawed heroes, fallen gods, false religions, etc.) but also to the “dark” side. A well-intentioned inquisitor or conqueror might surprise your players (or reader, etc.) more than a corrupt priest or evil king.