

The Light of Civilization Flickers



This is a grim land. Summers are short. Winters are long. The towns are overcrowded. Food is expensive. Guilds control trade. Nobility control the taxes. Priests pray for our damned souls.

Out there, beyond those walls, are beasts, bogies, monsters. They inhabit the forests, live under the fields, dwell in the ruins of our burned-out fortresses. They kidnap the lone wanderer, harry our caravans, and when they are bold, they attack our towns.

This land is wild, untamable, and in it we struggle to survive. We who thought we could conquer it, subjugate it—we are guests here, our days numbered.

Our forebears succeeded in wedging a toehold—a small point of light in a vast, weird darkness. Their hubris led them to believe they had won, that victory was inevitable. But they were wrong. The forests fought back. The mountains rebelled. The seas heaved in protest. *Things* issued forth from crevices and caves; the foam and fire spat forth a writhing, crawling answer to our fathers' "conquest." We fought them. We banished them. We flung spell and prayer at them. But they came like a creeping tide, forcing us steadily back.

So now most of us crowd into our walled towns and make do with what's been given to us. Some hardy folk brave the long nights and, far behind our defenses, work the soil at dawn. A few of us—those with nothing left—take up torch and sword and stride forth into the dark wilds.

For underneath the roots are the ruins of those who came before us. Layers of foolhardy civilizations crumbling atop one another like corpses. Each thought they could conquer this land. Each failed.

But in failure, they left us hope. They left us gold, artifacts, secrets, knowledge. Those brave or foolish enough to bring back these treasures are richly rewarded. Those successful enough can even rise above their station.

Thus, we can become heroes.

...if we survive.

What Is This Game About?

Torchbearer is a riff on the early model of fantasy roleplaying games. In it, you take on the role of a fortune-seeking adventurer. To earn that fortune, you must explore forlorn ruins, brave terrible monsters and retrieve forgotten treasures.

However, this game is not about being a hero. It is not about fighting for what you believe. This game is about exploration and survival.

You may become a hero. You might have to fight for your ideals. But to do either of those things, you must prove yourself in the wilds.

Because there are no jobs, no inheritance, no other opportunities for deadbeat adventurers like you. This life is your only hope to survive this world.

Welcome to Your New Life

To play the game, one player takes the job of playing the antagonists, supporting characters, setting and scenery. This player is called the Game Master or GM. The other players take on the role of individual characters. They are the adventurers.

The GM's job is to transform the players' adventurer characters into heroes. How? By challenging the players with obstacles set in their path. It is only by overcoming difficult challenges and passing through the fire of conflict that the players' characters can become heroes.

It's a very tough job—the characters are the lowest, most desperate of sorts. Turning them into heroes is no mean feat.

What Kind of Game Is This?

Torchbearer is a roleplaying game. And it's part of the brand of games Burning Wheel HQ has been producing for over ten years. It's about making difficult choices, and it involves exploring the world and your character through the game rules and systems.

This is a hard game. It's not a simple game. There are many moving parts and it's not possible to experience the whole



game in one or even two sessions. If you prefer lighter games, there are many other excellent choices available for you designed by our friends. If you're ready to sink your teeth into a good game that will reward you for mastering the system over 10 or 20 sessions, this is the game for you.

In the spectrum of BWHQ books, Torchbearer is advanced Mouse Guard. While it's not as complex as Burning Wheel or Burning Empires, it's certainly more involved than Mouse Guard or even FreeMarket.

What Do You Need to Play?

Torchbearer requires a few things to play properly: the rule book, character sheets, other reference sheets, pencils and dice. You'll also need some tokens, coins or stones for the conflict rules. About 20-30 will do.

And while not required, we highly recommend that each player (including the GM) have a player's deck. The cards speed up game play. The player's deck contains weapon, action, condition and light cards. It can be ordered on our website.

Structure of the Book

This book is broken down into five main sections: An Adventurer's Essential Guide to Life on the Road; The Dungeoneer's Survival Guide; Safe Havens and Other Poor Assumptions; the Skein of Destiny; and Calamity, Calumny and Catastrophe: Rules for the Game Master.

The Adventurer's Essential Guide to Life on the Road

The Adventurer's Essential Guide section describes the characters of Torchbearer—how to make them and how to play them. It contains nine chapters: the Anatomy of an Adventurer, You All Meet at an Inn, I Am Wise, Traits, Abilities, Skills, Inventory, Gear and Magic & Miracles.

The Dungeoneer's Survival Guide

The Dungeoneer's Survival Guide section contains the core rules of the game—how, when and why you roll dice. Within its bounds you will find five chapters: Setting Out, Time & Light, Overcoming Obstacles, Conflicts and Conditions & Recovery.

Safe Havens and Other Poor Assumptions

There are three places and times to rest: in camp, in town and over the winter. This section devotes a chapter to each instance: Camp, Town and Winter.

Skein of Destiny

All of our fates are woven into the Skein of Destiny. This section describes how we advance ourselves in four chapters: Advancement, It's What You Fight For, Rewards and Levels.

Calamity, Calumny and Catastrophe: Rules for the Game Master

The final section is the largest of the five. Its 11 chapters delineate the guidelines for running the game, designing adventures and determining obstacles. These chapters are a heavy weight for one to bear, but such is the burden of the Game Master in Torchbearer. We know them by these names: Prepare Thyself, Tricks of the Trade, Adventure Design, Wandering Monsters, Ability & Skill Factors, Loot, Denizens, Under the House of the Three Squires, Sample Characters, Other Weapons and Torchbearer Procedures.

Reading This Book

If you're a savvy one, you'll read through the first four sections and familiarize yourself with your new life. It'll increase your odds of survival.

If you're saddled with running this game for your less ambitious mates, you have the onerous task of reading through the whole beast. But focus on the Dungeoneer's Survival Guide, Safe Havens and Rules for the Game Master. Don't focus too much on the Essential Guide or the Skein of Destiny. And in particular, be familiar with Overcoming Obstacles, Conflicts and Ability & Skill Factors. Those are the chapters you'll refer to most in play.

Roleplaying

This is a roleplaying game. Roleplaying games are peculiar and unique. They require a lot of imagination and investment from the players, but this creative input is also what makes roleplaying games great. We get to wrap our imaginations around a variety of interesting situations and explore them.

Each player takes on a role in this game—the players have their characters, the GM has his antagonists and supporting characters. In play, you decide what your character is doing and who he is talking to. It's sort of like acting out a part in a play or movie, except there's no script. Between scenes, we roll dice and make a few notes rather than sitting in our trailers or waiting offstage.

Performance

When you play your character, decide on a voice and an attitude for him or her. Create a unique mannerism that embodies your character. Use the voice and mannerism to describe your character's actions in the game.



First and Third Person

There are two ways to describe your character's actions in the game: first person and third person.

First person means you describe your character's actions using I, my, me or mine: "I head up to the inn to meet Dralic."

Third person means you describe your character's actions using he or she, him, her, his or hers: "He heads up to the inn to meet Dralic. Beren orders a drink and tells Dralic what happened."

Either form of performance or description is acceptable in play.

Rolls and Tests

In addition to acting out how your character behaves, you roll dice to determine the outcome of your character's actions. You roll dice when your character is tested—when you must overcome an obstacle.

In the description of the rules, you'll see the term "test" used. It simply means a roll of the dice.

Control

Most of the time, you're in control of what your character does and doesn't do. You get to describe what your character's good at, what his or her quirks are and what he or she is not so good at.

Every so often, you're going to lose control of your character for a moment. When you attempt to do something and fail your test, the GM gets to take over and describe something that went wrong. The GM can tell everyone about something your character did that was misguided or even bad. Or the GM can describe an unforeseen effect that your actions caused. He gets to stick it to you for a moment. It's painful, but new problems add to the fun of the game.

Success and failure for rolls are described in detail in the *Overcoming Obstacles* chapter.

Unplanned Stories

When we start a session of play for *Torchbearer*, no one knows exactly how it's going to end, neither the players nor the GM. We know we'll be using our characters and that the GM will present us with an adventure. That's the beginning. From there, the story will twist and turn based on the outcomes of the rolls in the game. Once the adventure has been completed (or failed), we stop and look back at the session. Only then can we see the story we've created.

Be Polite, Be Generous

As you're playing your character, be polite and respectful to everyone else at the table. If your character is angry, you

should not use that as an excuse to be angry or mean to the other players. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak; make sure that everyone gets a chance to be in the spotlight.

When someone has the dice and is about to roll, the rest of the table must be quiet and attentive. It's that player's turn to add to the story. Before rolling, he or she gets to describe what that character is doing. Everyone stops, listens and supports the player.

Passing the Spotlight

It's the GM's job to pass the spotlight around and make sure every player gets an opportunity to contribute. But players should strive to be generous with one another, too.

If you don't have anything to contribute to a particular scene, that's okay. Offer some words of encouragement and ask other players what they're doing.

Table Chatter

When you play this game, you do not spend the entire session "in character." You have moments of characterization interspersed with listening to the other players, dice rolls, rule references and table chatter.

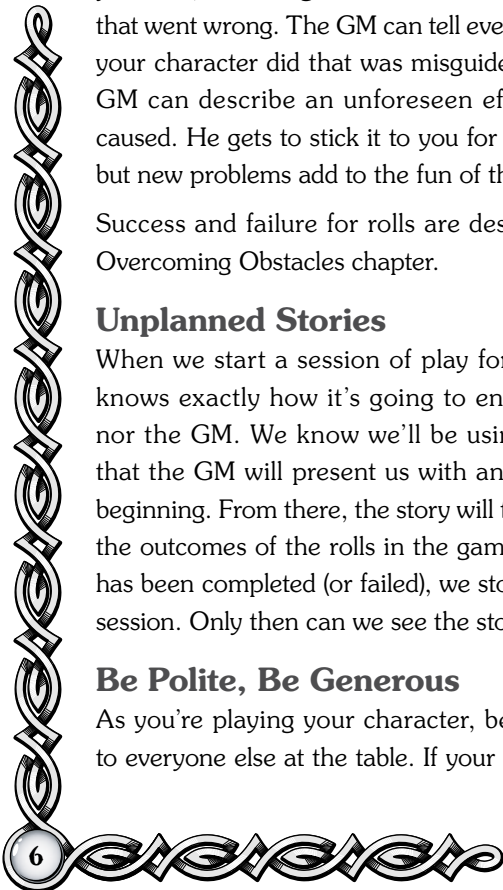
Table chatter is our term for giving the other players advice about the game. Advice doesn't come from your character, it comes from you!

Table chatter is important to this game. You should give each other advice and talk about the best strategies. However, be polite and respectful. Do not boss another player around. If another player doesn't want your advice, let him or her choose his or her own course. Never interrupt another player's performance with your table chatter. Always listen first, then discuss. Make suggestions, but don't lobby. There's a difference between contributing by tossing out an idea and arguing for a certain path.

Description Forward!

As a player, you describe your actions in response to the GM's descriptions. Tell the GM what your character does, touches, manipulates, etc. Ask questions about the environment. But don't tell the GM what skill or ability you use! Your description of your character's actions should fit entirely within the context of what happens in the game world.

If you're clever, you'll frame those descriptions around your character's strengths. Any other player who wishes to help should describe how their character supports the first character's action.



Explain how you use your gear and surroundings to overcome the environment. Think creatively! Use the skills and abilities on your sheet as inspiration, but always talk in terms of action not using a skill.

"I SCOUT AHEAD," NOT "I WANT TO USE THE SCOUT SKILL..."

Structure of Play

This game is meant to be mastered in about a dozen sessions of two to four hours each—enough sessions to level and maybe make something of yourself. That’s our recommendation, but you can play fewer or more sessions if you want. In your very first session, you’ll create your characters and then play for a bit.

During a session, the players use their characters to tackle an adventure presented by the GM. A session of play consists of the prologue, one or more adventure phases, one or more camp phases and possibly a town phase.

- ⊕ During the prologue, one player recounts the events of the previous session and then the whole group takes care of a bit of pre-game bookkeeping.
- ⊕ In the adventure phase, you tackle a series of problems presented by the GM by testing your character’s abilities. The results of these tests determine where the game goes next.
- ⊕ In the camp phase, you rest and prepare for your next foray.
- ⊕ In town, you reequip, rest and spend your loot!

Explore

As the GM describes the environment to you, explore it by asking questions:

- ⊕ Can I hear anything unusual?
- ⊕ Are there any distinctive markings?
- ⊕ Has the dust been disturbed?
- ⊕ Is one area more worn or trod upon than the rest?
- ⊕ What does it smell like?
- ⊕ What can I see when I look in this direction?

The GM’s answers will sketch out the scope of the problems you must face.

The Character Sheet

You’re required to keep a written record of your character. Character sheets are provided as downloads at TorchbearerRPG.com for this purpose. Characters evolve and grow as play progresses. Use a pencil to mark the sheet so you can make changes.

As you read the book, have a character sheet handy. It provides a quick reference for how most of the rules of the game interact. You can download the character sheet

from TorchbearerRPG.com or refer to the example in the Anatomy of an Adventurer chapter.

Dice and Terms

Torchbearer uses common six-sided dice for all rolls. In order to decide the outcome of uncertain events in the game, we roll handfuls of dice—usually three to six. The number of dice rolled depends on how skilled your character is in a particular area, how much help you have and a few other considerations.

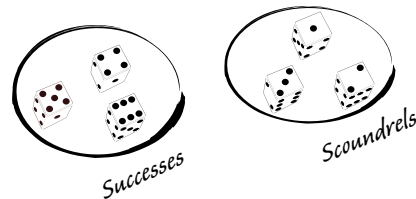
In each roll, every die counts as its own result. It’s either a “yes” or a “no.” A yes is called a success. The more successes, the better. Any die that comes up as a “no” result is a hindrance to your cause and doesn’t count toward success. We call those dice scoundrels. They’re bad for business!

Successes

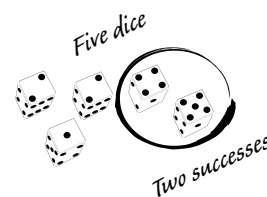
A 4, 5 or 6 result on a die is a success. After the dice are rolled, count up all your successes.

Scoundrels

A 1, 2 or 3 result is a scoundrel.



ROLLING A HANDFUL OF FIVE DICE, MY LUCK GIVES ME A 1, 2, 2, 4, 5 RESULT. TWO OF THE DICE CAME UP 4 OR HIGHER, THUS I ROLLED TWO SUCCESSSES, THE REST ARE SCOUNDRELS.



When you roll dice, you need successes in order to pass the tests set before you in the game.

Obstacle

Obstacles are integral to the game. The difficulty of a test is often described as the obstacle. Obstacles are descriptive—a steep climb, a rusty lock, an angry dog—but they’re also described as a number, usually from 1 to 10. The number attached to the obstacle tells you how many successes you need to roll to pass the test.

IF THE RUSTY LOCK IS AN OBSTACLE 4, I HAVE TO ROLL FOUR SUCCESSSES ON MY CRIMINAL SKILL TO PASS THE TEST AND OPEN THE LOCK.



Twist or Condition

If you fail a test, you do not succeed. Instead, the GM introduces a twist or gives you a condition in exchange for getting what you want.

+1D, +2D

+1D, +2D, etc., means you add the indicated number of dice to your ability or skill before you roll the dice. If you see a notation for just “2D” that means two dice.

-1D, -2D

-1D, -2D, etc., means you subtract the indicated number of dice from your ability or skill before you roll the dice.

+s

The “+s” notation indicates that a number of bonus successes are applied to successful or tied rolls—*never to failed rolls*.

“+s” MEANS THAT IF YOU’VE PASSED OR TIED THE TEST, ADD ANOTHER SUCCESS TO YOUR TOTAL.

-s

If you see a notation for a “-s,” subtract the indicated number of successes after you roll, pass or fail.

-2s INDICATES THAT AFTER YOU ROLL, SUBTRACT TWO SUCCESSES AND THEN DETERMINE IF YOU PASSED OR FAILED THE TEST.

Reroll 6

Some rules in the game allow you to reroll a die that comes up a 6. When using these rules, leave the die that rolled a 6 on the table so it can be counted. Pick up a new die and roll it for your bonus roll.

If you have a penalty that subtracts successes on a roll, finish rerolling all of your dice before counting your successes.

2d6, 3d6

If you see a listing for 2d6 or 3d6, the lowercase *d* indicates you roll that many dice and add them together.

Margin of Success

As you read on, you’ll see the term “margin of success.” For example:

REDUCE YOUR OPPONENT’S DISPOSITION BY YOUR MARGIN OF SUCCESS.

Margin of success is a game term that means “count each extra success over what you needed and use that number.”

IF YOU NEEDED THREE SUCCESSES BUT ROLLED FIVE, YOU HAVE A MARGIN OF SUCCESS OF TWO.

Margin of Failure

Margin of failure is the opposite of margin of success. It means that you count the number of successes by which you missed and use that number.

IF YOU NEEDED THREE SUCCESSES AND YOU ROLLED NONE, YOU HAVE A MARGIN OF FAILURE OF THREE.

Other Terms

There are a handful of other terms used in the game—rewards, the names of your abilities and how we determine obstacles, for example—but we’ll present those in the appropriate chapters.

Some terms may be introduced before being fully explained in order to make a rule complete. Don’t worry. Keep reading. All will be explained.

