

Greyhawk – What is it? An Outside Overview of the World or Orelh

What does it mean for a product or adventure or even an entirely new creation to be suitably "Greyhawk?"

Criteria No. 1 Applied Internal Historic Consistency

Greyhawk has a strong internal sense of history that is consistently applied in all "Greyhawk" products or creations. However, not every product published under the name "Greyhawk" meets this criteria.

Greyhawk is a storied realm. It's seminal figures, good and ill, are interwoven throughout the setting. It has a defined history that strongly influences the present and future of the setting. Greyhawk's history is not a footnote but an integral part of the setting that must be understood to truly comprehend the relationships among men, nations and even gods. True "Greyhawk" products or creations build on this history, incorporate it and develop it. The best such products or creations leave enough open ends to allow for further such development. More mediocre attempt closure of every loose thread.

Criteria No. 2 Player Resolution of Critical Events

The seminal events in Greyhawk's current history and development are all presented such that the players may not only take part but play a leading role.

Players could fight the Greyhawk Wars. Players defeated the hordes of the Temple of Elemental Evil. Players defeated Lolth. Players turned the tide as luz aced Vecna.

In the Forgotten Realms, for example, Ao decrees an event and the players get to clean up in the aftermath. Cyric destroys Zhentil Keep offstage and the players get to delve into the ruins. Gods die to be replaced by mortals and the players watch. Elminster sends players on a mission but ultimately keeps from them the greater goal the mission serves.

When you play in Greyhawk, you join in the weaving of a tapestry of which you are a vital part. Greyhawk is about your story in the context of Greyhawk's story. Roleplaying in Greyhawk involves playing your part in the longest running AD&D campaign in existence. It is bigger than you are but you can become as great as it is. That is the essence of Greyhawk's history. It enfolds, informs and connects every part of the setting and all who play there of any length of time.

Criteria No. 3 NPCs Reward More Often Than They Advise or Direct

NPC's in Greyhawk are not godlike figures who direct the course of events upon which your character is washed like the tide. Neither do they persistently show up to advise you. They may do both but more often they serve as the measuring stick against which your character's performance can be judged and serve to reward your character by recognizing their accomplishments or otherwise admitting your character into their august company.

The Circle of Eight are aloof. They do not want to be your buddy. Neither do they have a laundry list of chores for you to perform. Rather, in Greyhawk you will find adventure without such NPCs suggesting it.

In the Forgotten Realms, for example, Elminster is famous for sending characters on their way. The Harpers do the same. Ultimately, Elminster or the Harpers play the directing role and may indeed appear to steal the show or otherwise claim ultimate victory.

In Greyhawk, YOU are the hero. Without assistance from the likes of the Circle of Eight and without them acting as a safety net. You can go your own way, in fact, without them ever troubling you. This cannot be so simply said in settings such as the Forgotten Realms and has not a little to do with Criteria No. 2 (Player Resolution of Critical Events in Greyhawk vs. NPC Resolution of Critical Events in FR).

Criteria No. 4 Persistent Personified Evil

Evil in Greyhawk is persistent. It is halted, checked or imprisoned but it is not defeated with finality for all time. The triumph over evil is a relative thing, ultimately transitory.

Evil in Greyhawk is personified. Evil has faces and names attached to it that ring down through the setting's history. It is not an evil that pops up purely to give the players something to strive against and defeat before moving on to the next evil that similarly appears out of relative nowhere.

Vecna, luz, Lolth, Tharzidun, the Scarlet Brotherhood, Aerdi, Kas, even Turrosh Mak, all met this criteria. They are highly personified forces that spring from the settings specific history. By comparison, evil in the Forgotten Realms is of the pop-up variety save for the Red Wizards and Zhentim. Menaces appear from nowhere or with on the spot histories that never before appeared in the setting. Greyhawk allows for this type of toaster villainy but it also established from the first villains of a historic character that transcend the needs of the adventure of the moment.

Criteria No. 5 Villainous Variety

Villainy in Greyhawk runs the gambit from the cosmic menace of Tharzidun, to the planar peril of Lolth, to the cambion menace of luz, to the purely moral menace of Turrosh Mak. Their is variety in the villainy. Villainy in Greyhawk is like a box of chocolates from Hell; you never know for sure what you are going to get (Best Example: The Giant Series). Greyhawk's villains do not announce themselves; you have to figure it out.

Compare villainy in the Forgotten Realms. The variety isn't there. You have scads of godly villains. The Red Wizards. The Zhents. It is feast or famine. And FR villains have signature trademarks that all but announce who you are facing, unless of course it is an evil toaster pastry.

Villains in Greyhawk will also turn on each other. The luz/Vecna conflict being perhaps the most famous. In other settings, villains are villains, identified by their clearly visible placards, sandwich signs or more "subtly" their black attire. You can count on them to always do the wrong thing.

Greyhawk keeps you guessing. Like a good Call of Cthulthu adventure.

Criteria No. 6 Heroism With a Price

Greyhawk's heros rarely slay the evil wizard, who will trouble the land no more, to the full voiced cheers of the crowd. Best luz and you are marked. He will be back but you will have to deal with a likely enraged Zuggotomy in the meanwhile. Greyhawk's villains don't exist in a vacuum and neither do Greyhawk's heroes. Everything is linked.

Heroism has a meaning within the setting that makes it more than a solitary act echoing in the vastness. It attracts attention, good and ill. It is immediate and brings a notoriety that other settings can only talk about. Notables exist to recognize your accomplishments and to measure you against themselves and the foe you defeated. And, they will have likely played little or no role in your victory. Evil too takes your measure for darker reasons.

This criterion can best be seen in the breach. The interconnection of people and places and the loose ends creates this effect, though few published adventures use it to motivate future adventures. The revised supermodule series provides the greatest opportunity on this score.

Criteria No. 7 Militant Neutrality

On Oerth, the forces of neutrality are arguably at least as powerful as those of good and evil and certainly as active.

Iquander alone has accurately defined this characteristic of Greyhawk and I acknowledge his work. Greyhawk is not concerned with the triumph of good over evil. The very nature of the evils loose on Oerth makes such triumphs fleeting at best. Greyhawk endures evil and circumvents it. It does not defeat it.

Evil forces, of course, will attempt to conquer Oerth. And just as certainly they will be opposed by forces who will seek to banish evil from the world. Neither will succeed. Neither in the long history of Oerth has ever succeeded. Good and evil are well enough matched that outcomes are never certain and always close calls one way or the other.

Moreover, evil on Oerth is not monolithic. Various demon lords and ladies contend with each other. Iuz battles Vecna. Kas seeks Vecna's destruction. Iuz feuds with his mother and father. Evil beings are true to no one save themselves.

Perhaps accounting for all of this, Oerth has strong and active neutrally aligned forces, working to preserve a balance between good and evil. While hardly organized, these forces nonetheless manage to be quite effective. The Circle of Eight, mighty wizards all, seeks a middle path. Istus, the divine Lady of Fate, tests all but favors none. Druids are a quiet but ever present presence. Indeed, many of Greyhawk's deities reflect a distinct neutral bent.

Compare Toril. Evil is overmatched by Elminster, the Seven Sisters (good aligned minions of the goddess of magic), the Harpers, the Lords of Waterdeep and activist gods. Evil is on the run and kept that way. It has but few strong holds and is highly transient, rarely surviving long enough to present more than a temporary challenge. Good triumphs on Toril. The dragon is slain, never to rise. The horror you never heard of before yesterday is laid to rest. The bad gods are thrown down!

The differences could not be more striking. Greyhawk is about struggle against evenly matched and long standing opponents. FR is about victory over transient and overmatched opponents.

Criteria No. 8 Personal Magics

Greyhawk is not a low fantasy setting save by comparison to settings on magical overload. Birthright is a low fantasy setting. The Forgotten Realms is a high fantasy setting. Greyhawk falls in between.

What distinguishes magic in Greyhawk is that it is highly personalized. Look at the spells. Mordenkain's this. Nystul's that. Otiluke's the other. Magic is personalized by any wizard not of the hedge variety. Look at the artifacts for still more proof. What Birthright strives to achieve sparingly, Greyhawk has already accomplished in fair profusion. Spells have a history as due magic items. While there are +1 swords of no certain fame, many are the items with specific histories. Look at the Greyhawk Adventures hardback.

Similarly magical instruction in Greyhawk is personal. Greyhawk does not know great guilds of wizards but flourishes with a developed system of apprenticeships. One need but look at the Circle of Eight to see this. They, with one, possibly two, exceptions, belong to no guild of mages, and they that do belong do so as patrons at best and more probably as figureheads. Neither can the Circle itself be considered a guild. This mighty example and the utter lack of a single magical guild of any note, fairly well makes the case.

I will at a later point post more directly on this subject as I found the article in the Oerth Journal about wizardly organizations purest fantasy, out of keeping with the available information on magic in Greyhawk, though the article was still interesting for all that.

Summary

These then are the eight traits that define the Greyhawk feel. Most critical are 1st (Applied Internal Historic Consistency), 4th (Persistent Personified Evil) and 7th (Militant Neutrality) points. At the barest minimum to be considered truly "Greyhawk" a product or creation must adhere to these three criteria. Better products or creations adhere to progressively more of these criteria.

Without doing a full dress analysis of From the Ashes, I think we can see that it utterly fails to adhere to the 7th criterion. FtA throws neutrality out the window in favor of paring off goods and evils in a Flaneass tilted wildly toward evil. Furondy/Nyrond is pared off with Iuz. Aerdi is pared off with Nyrond. Keoland is paired off with the Scarlet Brotherhood/Pomarj. While overall, evil is clearly ascendant. This sort of dark fantasy, whatever its merits otherwise, defies the tradition of active neutrality that defined Greyhawk beforehand. That about half all WoG players rejected FtA supports this hypothesis. FtA's designers, to include the Greyhawk Wars, were ignorant, willfully or otherwise, of the setting in which they worked. The resulting products while technically proficient, even well done on their own merits, were sadly lacking in that Greyhawk feel. Of course, some would choose to ignore this, finding the change "bracing," others with

duller senses wouldn't even notice.

In any event, now we have a list of what puts the Grey in the Hawk. This list is by no means exclusive. I may have overlooked something and I know some listed criteria are of lesser note than others or mere permutations. However, I think overall the list can stand up to close scrutiny. Have at it.