

TALES OF THE IRON LEAGUE

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1 Introduction

Foreword

What I like to do is play games and feed hungry people. This product lets me do both.

First, the games. I learned to play **Dungeons & Dragons**® in the 6th grade. I learned from a bewildering mix of **AD&D**® and Holmes Blue Box; nobody explained to me that they were different games, so I was initially quite confused. But I loved those games, and through my teens and twenties and thirties and forties and fifties I have never really stopped playing them. As different versions of the games have been developed, I have learned the new rulesets and played them as well.

I always felt a yearning for the older rulesets, however, especially the B/X version of D&D authored by **Tom Moldvay** in 1981, which I felt was particularly elegant and well-presented. When I first encountered the OSR, or Old School Revolution, I embraced its return to a simpler time, and I am much in the debt of **Dan Proctor** for his development of **Labyrinth Lord**®, a reprint and reissue of those B/X rules I loved so much. Labyrinth Lord has been my D&D engine of choice for years now, but as I have played it, I have realized that many of the later versions of the game had wonderful innovations and ideas that I liked enough to want to adopt them into my Labyrinth Lord games.

I did what every gamer I know does – I added house rules and interpretations to try to add value to the already-excellent Labyrinth Lord rules engine. But the house rules and interpretations began to become extremely cumbersome, to the point that I realized I had more house rule than Labyrinth Lord game, so I decided to bite the bullet and create a new game out of whole cloth. What you are reading is that: a decidedly post-OSR game, deeply rooted in my love of B/X D&D and Labyrinth Lord but adding in many great systemic changes that a horde of clever people developed for other game editions, and a few new ideas of my own.

So now I run this game at conventions instead. I love Labyrinth Lord for convention play because, as it represents a streamlined version of Dungeons and Dragons, it is very easy for relative newcomers to pick up a play. Dungeons and Dragons is kind of a common language for role-playing gamers; you may not like it, but if you have dipped your toes into this hobby much, you have probably learned the basics of how to play it.

I like to run games where people can sit down and play quickly, and Labyrinth Lord has scratched that itch admirably. This game is more complex than Labyrinth Lord, but the basic mechanics work more or less the same: sit down, roll some dice as dictated by the DM, compare the results to some numbers on a character sheet, and then the DM tells you what happens. My goal with **Tales of the Iron League** was to preserve the feel of that gameplay experience, at least for the players, and facilitate that quick start role-playing experience.

And that's where the hungry people come in. My favorite conventions – the best conventions, really – are charity conventions. They exist to put people and games together, but also to benefit the common good, because that's what gatherings of people – churches, communities, governments, whatever – ought to do.

My favorite charity to benefit is the **Houston Food Bank**. What they do, like a convention, is put things together. In this case, they put together food with people who give food to hungry people. Often, they take money donations, turn it into food, and provide that to food providers. Other times they take food directly donated to them and pass it out to those who can effectively put it in the hands of people who are hungry.

They aren't a soup kitchen or a food pantry, and people who volunteer at the Houston Food Bank never directly scoop food onto somebody's tray. Instead, they are the benefactor of the many soup kitchens and food pantries in my hometown who do that work. When a family gets a sack of groceries to help them through a tough month, that sack may have been assembled by a church food pantry, but its contents probably passed through the Houston Food Bank. When a food kitchen serves up a Thanksgiving dinner to anybody who's hungry, the cranberry and

stuffing was probably donated to the Houston Food Bank, who then doled it out to the people who would prepare and serve it up.

The Houston Food Bank, by dint of being big and well-organized, makes the whole feeding-hungry-people enterprise much more effective. And that's important, because despite living in a wealthy nation and a growing city, I live in a town where tens of thousands of people don't know where their next meal is coming from. Regardless of your politics, that's appalling.

So, here's my promise to you: you will not find this **Tales of the Iron League** product on sale, here or elsewhere, because I think access to gaming should be available to everybody, even people who don't have a lot of money. But this game will have mechanisms for donating your spare money, if you have some, to the Houston Food Bank – and in return, you will receive in-game benefits. I'm generally opposed to paid in-game benefits in most types of games, but in this case, it's not going to line my pockets or the pockets of anybody else. It's going to feed hungry people, and that's a worthy use of your spare dollars. Even if you choose not to take advantage of this in-game benefit mechanics, please consider donating anyway to the Houston Food Bank at houstonfoodbank.org. They're a good cause and they help feed hungry people.

Tales of the Iron League can be freely copied, altered, or distributed, provided it remains free to use. If you use all or part of this game for a paid product, you're a thief and we can't be friends any more.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to start by thanking my wife. She has supported my writing and game hobbies over the years, even though my time could have been spent doing things with her instead. Thanks, **Bon**.

I also need to thank the creators of **Dungeons & Dragons**®. There are so many names to cite there – **Gary Gygax** and **Dave Arneson**, certainly, but also the initial players and testers, the wealth of creative and artistic types at **TSR**® who turned a good idea into a thing of beauty, and the many teams of smart people over the decades who have created new generations of fun games.

And then there are the innovators who didn't work on **Dungeons & Dragons** – the authors of role-playing products in hundreds or thousands of genres who slaved away just so that people like me could have fun in their imaginary worlds. Thanks, also, to the OSR retro-cloners and grognards who kept the flame alive.

I want to thank my parents – my Mom for pushing me to not settle for the lowest-energy solution, and my Dad for honing my writing skills and encouraging me to do better.

There are also my many friends who have encouraged me and played in my games. Thanks, you fine people, for thinking I could do this. Also, thanks to my kids for putting up with my rattling on about game ideas even when they wanted to think about something else. Thanks, also, to the playtesters: **Andy Arenson, Angelo Benedetto, Bill Brecht, Theron Bretz, Derek Burmaster, Matt Cohen, Matt Drwenski, Kyle Giacco, Tim Gilheart, Matt Hildebrand, Rick Jones, Dyson Logos, Greg Morrow, Noah, Cameron Orwin, Jayne Praxis, Amy Price, Topher Scott, Destini Smith, Eric Solberg, Oscar Solberg, and James West**.

I'd like to end by thanking my wife. She gets two thanks. Thanks, **Bon**.

What is This?

You are reading the rules to a game. Where's the rest of the game? Where is the box it came in; where is the board; where are the tokens; where is the play money?

Sorry, this isn't that kind of game. This game doesn't come with physical components. These rules are the only part of the game that you receive. There are a few other things you will need to help you play – pens or pencils, paper (both lined and gridded), and at least one set of polyhedral dice (see *A Brief Word on Dice* below). You'll also need a good physical space; a clean kitchen table is ideal. You'll certainly need to find some friends – this is a game that wants to be played in a group, probably the same size as the number of chairs around your kitchen table.

Mostly, however, what you need to provide is imagination. Forget about props; this game is played in your head, dreaming up crazy stuff and sharing it with your fellow players. The name of this game is **Tales of the Iron League**. This game is a **role-playing game**, or **RPG** for short.

Do you remember playing on playgrounds when you were small? You and your playmates would have endless fun pretending to be cops and robbers, or Avengers, or characters from Harry Potter. Those freeform games in the park were role-playing games. You pretended to be somebody else, playing a role like an actor in a play, and then your pretend-self interacted with all the other pretend-selves, and then you would argue with each other about who shot who first until somebody went home in tears.

Of course, we would like to avoid any hurt feelings, so this game is a little more structured than a playground game. **Tales of the Iron League** has rules for figuring out who can do what; who succeeds in what they are trying to do, and who fails; who lives and who dies. The rules provide a framework within which your imagination can play, almost without limitation, because whatever you imagine your pretend-self attempts to do – right or wrong, smart or dumb, for good or for ill – that’s what happens.

Tales of the Iron League is a game about heroic characters, each with fantastic abilities and a unique set of skills, seeking adventure and fortune in a world of magic and monsters. Except for one, each player plays the role of one of these characters, who band together to risk horrific creatures, lethal traps, and dastardly villains in their search for ancient treasures, magical artifacts, long-lost secrets, and the respect of all who hear the tales of their exploits.

That one last player serves as referee, and the director of the play, and the Greek chorus as well; this person is called the **Game Moderator**, or **GM**. The GM describes the world to the other players, tells them what challenges threaten them, plays the roles of every other living being in the imaginary world, adjudicates the rules for when interesting things happen, and generally facilitates having adventures in a shared pretend environment.

There is no winning or losing this game – not in the conventional sense. You win by having fun. You lose by not having fun, or by causing others to not have fun. It is possible for your characters to be successful, in the sense that they may overcome the challenges they face, earning great treasure in the process. They may even be so successful that they, in time, gain experience at adventuring and become better at what they do, allowing them to go on more dangerous adventures, slaying more powerful beasts, acquiring even more valuable loot, etc.

OR your characters might be unsuccessful, in the sense that they may die – those monsters they are trying to slay may instead slay them; those traps they are attempting to bypass may unexpectedly go off; that attempt to heroically swing across a chasm on a vine may, alas, fall a few feet short.

The death of a character is unfortunate, but it’s not a loss – especially if, during that hero’s death, you are left with a great story about Wanda the Warrior’s vine snapping at **just** the wrong moment. Mostly, RPGs are about stories – acquiring them to remember later and living them in the moment.

The Iron League

The setting for this game is another world, a place called **Uroth**. In some ways this world is like our own – it has gravity, an atmosphere and weather, night and day, seasons much like our own. In other ways Uroth is rather different – a map of the world found in Chapter 10 doesn’t look anything like our Earth.

There are people living on Uroth, but while many of them are humans, many other intelligent species abound. Some, like the stocky dwarves, the haughty and magical elves, or the small and friendly halflings, are often allies of humans who seek to live a harmonious life on this strange world. Others, like the militaristic orcs or the subterranean goblins, may make war upon humans and their friends.

Then there are creatures who can’t be called people, although some of them may be intelligent; strange monsters roam the world of Uroth, especially in the wild places far from cities and civilization. Some are friendly, but many will be hostile.

On Uroth, technology has not developed any further than the Middle Ages here on Earth. People fight using swords and armor, and the best defense against hostile armies is a sturdy castle wall. However, Uroth has something that Earth does not, and that's magic. A few people on Uroth have learned how to bend mystical forces to their will, casting powerful magic spells and creating miracles that would be impossible in the real world.

Uroth is a place of constant conflict, with nations warring against each other and monsters threatening to overwhelm poorly guarded frontiers. It is a place where empires rise and fall, and the remnants of forgotten civilizations still rise from overgrown jungles, or jut from sandy ocean beaches at low tide.

Into this world of many hazards, but also many opportunities, comes the **Iron League**. This organization is a collective of adventuring freelancers. The Iron League has hundreds of members, and the players are only a few of them. Each member of the Iron League is an adventurer, ready to risk life and limb in pursuit of treasure.

Nations hire the Iron League to help them make money. If a country has an old, ruined monastery that is fabled to contain a diamond the size of a goose egg, but it is also rumored to harbor terrifying monsters and ancient curses, that country might not wish to risk the lives of their own subjects on a task as hazardous as exploring a haunted old building. Instead, they may call in the Iron League, and the Iron League dispatches its members to the monastery.

Adventurers don't need a lot of direction to make money; the Iron League has found that if a collection of heroic types is turned loose in an area with instructions to find things of value, they will almost certainly find things of value, one way or another. The Iron League members enter the ruined monastery and find the diamond and any other treasure that might be there. They bring it out, the nation and the Iron League get their cut of the proceeds, and the rest is for the adventurers to keep.

OR, possibly, the Iron League members enter the ruined monastery and don't come back out, because they die there. That is the risk of adventuring.

The GM plays the role of Iron League leadership, advising the other players and their characters on where the Iron League has been contracted to go. The players then decide how they want to proceed and describe their actions to the GM. The GM tells them what they see. Adventuring unfolds from here, with the players and GM interacting back and forth to breathe life into a venture of the Iron League. Chapter 2 will describe how players can create a character they can use for these adventures.

The Game Moderator is the ultimate arbiter for rules and rulings in this game. The rules provide a common framework for play, but it falls to the GM to interpret those rules, and even throw them out when necessary. If the GM and the players disagree about how the rules work, a good GM listens to the players and strives to be a fair and impartial referee. However, at the end of the day, it is up to the GM to make a ruling and move on, and it is the duty of players to respect that judgment.

A Brief Word on Dice

Tales of the Iron League is played using a standard set of polyhedral dice. These dice are commonly found in game stores and through various online shopping sites. There are also free apps and online sites that allow a user to simulate rolling the kind of dice used in this game.

Most people are familiar with traditional 6-sided dice, and a set of polyhedral dice contains at least one of these, but this set has other kinds of dice as well. A typical set includes a 20-sided die, a 12-sided die, a 10-sided die, an 8-sided die, a 6-sided die, and a 4-sided die. It may have two 10-sided dice numbered from 0 to 9, which can be rolled simultaneously, with one representing the tens digit and the other representing the ones digit, to generate a number from 1 to 100 (a result of '0' and '0' is 100). This is commonly called a percentile die roll.

Rolling one or more dice generates a random number, and that's the basic mechanic used in this game to determine success or failure. These rules describe which dice to roll when taking an action, whether you need to

roll high or low, and how high or low you must roll to succeed. There is a lot of die-rolling in this game, so some abbreviated notation is called for.

Each type of die is identified by a small letter 'd' followed by the number of faces on that die; if the rules tell you to roll 1d20, that means 'roll a 20-sided die'. Sometimes you will roll two or more dice and add the results together; the number in front of the 'd' tells you how many dice to roll.

Example: The rules tell you to roll 2d6, so you roll two 6-sided dice. The results are a four and a six; you add those numbers together for a total of 10.

Sometimes you are instructed to roll a die and then add or subtract a number. You will do this after you roll the die. If the rules tell you to roll 1d6+1, you roll one 6-sided die and then add one to the result. If you are instructed to roll 3d8+5, you will roll three 8-sided dice, add the results together, and then add five to the total for the result.

Occasionally you may need to roll 1d2 or 1d3, two dice that don't exist in standard polyhedral sets. To simulate 1d2, roll a d6 and let a result of 1, 2, or 3 represent an outcome of one, and a result of 4, 5, or 6 represent an outcome of two. Similarly, if you need to simulate 1d3, roll a d6 with a result of 1 or 2 representing one, a result of 3 or 4 representing two, and a result of 5 or 6 representing three.

Another Brief Word on Pronouns, Gender and Sexual Orientation

In this game, the players should be able to play just about whatever character they want to. A good GM allows each player the freedom to decide what their character is like, and this is one area in which the GM should not exercise their power to overrule.

A player should be allowed to play a character whose gender is male, female, nonbinary, indeterminate, or something less easy to describe. They should be allowed to play a character who is straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or something more complex and wonderful. This game is fantasy; if a player has a particular fantasy in mind, please let them play it.

The author understands that there are some who might consider this affirmative statement to be an unwelcome detour into political matters. The author disagrees; the fundamental worth of people is not a subject for political debate. If you find this disagreement to be disagreeable, depart with no hard feelings – the virtual door is there, in the middle distance. May your gaming adventures take you far, both in terms of enjoyment and in terms of physical proximity to the author.

In these game rules, where examples are given that cite how a particular character might act, genderless pronouns (they/them/their) are used. This is not to say that gender does not exist in this game, or in the game world of Uroth. Chapter 10 will reveal that different parts of Uroth treat gender and sexuality differently. Rather, the intent is to convey that this game is intended for everybody, and no decisions regarding a character's gender or sexuality are wrong ones. Ungendered pronouns cover everybody.

In the spirit of inclusiveness, these rules seek to avoid the convention of assuming sample characters to be male. In this game, while you have great flexibility on your gender or sexual orientation, this has no impact on how effective your character is. Adventurers take many forms; anybody who thinks only straight men can have adventures is playing the wrong game.

One More Brief Word on Race, Species, and Class

In older games like this one, **race** was a word used to describe the kind of creature that becomes an adventuring character. That word is loaded with unfortunate context; we live in a world where the alleged racial differences between ethnicities and heritages have been used to justify all manner of horrors.

This game affirms that all human beings are created equally, and although there are many differences in cultures and beliefs among the human societies in this game, there are none that have any impact on game statistics or a

character's strengths and weaknesses. Where a distinction is drawn between two different types of creatures, this game uses the word *species*.

All human beings are part of one species. Dwarves and elves are different species that have attributes fundamentally different from those of humans. This game divides human characters into one of four different **classes**, which is something like a person's profession. Humanoid characters are not divided in this way; their species is their class.

This has its origins in the Basic Set D&D forebears of this game, and its inclusion in this game was intended to keep things simple, not to unnecessarily limit a character's capabilities. If you want to have an Elf character in your game that has the capabilities of a human Thief, there is no reason you cannot create a reasonable ruleset to achieve this. Future supplements to this game may attempt this as well.