

былина & богатырь

Bylina & Bogatyr

by Jared A. Sorensen

Introduction

The *bogatyr* is a figure from Russian folklore, a warrior of unsurpassed strength and virtue, literally meaning “strongman” or “hero.” *Bylinas* are poetic songs that relate the deeds of the bogatyr (and their female counterparts, called the *bogatyрка* or *polyanitsa*, a word meaning “field women”). These epic tales of heroes, magic, dragons and witches inspired me to write this game, as did the prospect of entering another 24-hour game competition. The main heroes of the bylina are:

Dobrynya Nikitich, the slayer of the dragon *Zmey Gorynych*. He’s a noble warrior analogous to the figure of St. George. Dobrynya’s virtue is his incredible bravery and tales of his fearlessness are legendary in the bylinas.

Ilya Muromets, a.k.a. “The Old Cossack.” A wise and strong warrior made famous in the story “Nightingale the Robber.” Ilya was born a cripple and remained lame until he turned thirty-three, when he was healed by three wise men. Ilya is regarded as the greatest of the bogatyr. He gained his superhuman strength as a dying gift from the giant *Svyatogor*.

Alyosha Popvich., a clever bogatyr and the son of a priest, he defeats his foes through guile and trickery. In early stories Alyosha kills the dragon *Tugarin Zmeevich*. Later on, the dragon was replaced by a Mongol warlord.

While Nikitich, Muromets and Popvich are the most famous of the bogatyr, there are other bogatyr of reknown. The bylinas of Novgorod describe *Sadko*, a rich merchant, and *Vassily Buslaev*, a ruffian known for his fierce temper and love of strong drink. Other bogatyr with magical backgrounds include *Mikula Selyaninovich*, a peasant hero from the steppes; *Volkh Vseslavich*, a magician with the ability to transform himself into a wolf; and Ilya Muromets’ friend *Svyatogor*, a giant knight from the mountains who was so massive that Russian soil could not bear his weight.



The Rule of Three

Three is a special number in the byliny and it has magical connotations. A bogatyr might embark on a journey that requires him to change horses three times, or he might be one of three brothers. Multiples of three are also used to describe great distances (three-ninth, or 3×9 , is another way of saying 27) much like 10,000 is a generic figure of great value in Chinese myths.



This game's system uses a roll of 3d6 (three six-sided dice) to generate a number between 3 and 18. The goal is to roll 3, 6, 9, 12, 15 or 18. Depending on the virtue of your bogatyr, you can roll as many as three dice and as few as one. Obviously, the more dice you roll the less likely you are to roll a low number and the easier it becomes to roll an average to high number.

As stated, the goal is to roll a multiple of three on the dice. But there are three specific rolls that carry special effects.

A roll of 3 on three six-sided dice (1+1+1) means that the hero acquires a Servant sometime in the scene. If the hero already has a Helper, the player can choose a new Servant with 1 Virtue, raise an existing Servant's Virtue by +1 or earn a Legend point.

A roll of 7 is a cursed roll, meaning that something terrible happens to the hero. The player may spend a Legend point to negate the curse (although the roll still fails).

A roll of 18 on three six-sided dice (6+6+6) means that the hero acquires a Gift sometime in the scene (usually as a result of the successful roll). If the hero already has a Gift, the player can choose a second Gift or gain a Legend point.



The Virtues

Bogatyr possess the following three virtues: Courage, Strength and Guile.

- Courage is defined as bravery both in and out of battle. A courageous knight follows his heart and doesn't balk when faced with uncertainty or fear. Heroes use courage to press on during a fight, no matter what the odds.
- Strength is not only the physical strength of the hero. It represents his spiritual strength as well. In combat, Strength determines the fighting ability of your hero.
- Guile is another word for cleverness. It is used to describe someone who prefers trickery to physical confrontation. In battle, Guile is used to avoid attacks and gain the upper-hand.

Female heroes possess similar qualities: Grace, Beauty and Charm.

- Grace enables a maiden to overcome hardship and to move in a pleasing manner. The arts of dancing, swordplay and horsemanship all require Grace.
- Beauty is both inner and outer beauty. Beautiful maidens are fair and strong and make fine wives.
- Charm is the maiden's ability to use her feminine wiles to influence others. Charm is analogous to Guile although it usually deals less with deceit and more with persuasion.

Bogatyr (male and female) start with +1 in one Virtue, +2 in a second and +3 in the third. Virtues don't improve by themselves over time but instead are modified using Legend points, Gifts and Servants.

Servants

Bogatyr may meet people, animals or magical creatures while adventuring through the countryside. These beings are called Servants in this game and they can be used to help a hero accomplish his goals. Rolling three 1's on three dice enable to the hero to retain the services of a Servant or embellish the abilities on an existing one. Male heroes start the game with one Servant (usually a good horse).

Servants possess Virtues that can aid the hero in time of need. All Servants begin with +1 Virtue, chosen from the following list:



Male Servants Female Servants

Courage	Grace
Strength	Beauty
Guile	Charm

Animal Servants

Courage or Grace or Speed
 Strength or Beauty or Stamina
 Guile or Charm or Wisdom

- Speed enables the animal to move quickly or in an unusual manner, enabling the hero to traverse great distances.
- Stamina helps the hero to overcome difficult terrain or dangerous obstacles.
- Wisdom reflects the animal's supernatural intelligence, meaning that it can speak and/or understand human languages and carry out complex orders.

If the bogatyr spends a Legend point, the Servant may carry out an order, enabling that Servant to make a die roll instead of the hero. If the Servant fails, the hero can then make his own die roll.

Rolling a 7 may result in the death or loss of a Servant, though the expenditure of a Legend point may prevent this. Servants can also die after taking Wounds (six Wounds per point of Virtue).

Servants are always named using a Virtue or a similar adjective (Clever Mischa, Sonja the Mighty and the Fierce Bear are all suitable names). Servants can never have more than one Virtue and are limited to +3 dice in their one Virtue.

Gifts

During your bogatyr's adventures, he (or she) may find or win any number of powerful Gifts that assist the hero in unique ways. This occurs when the hero rolls a natural 18 on three dice. Female heroes start the game with one Gift (usually a garment, item of jewelry or some kind of distinguishing feature such as snow-white skin or long golden hair). Gifts that are items are always brand-new and unmarked by use.

The Gift may grant one power that contradicts something that's been established during the game. For example, a hero who is injured could drink a potion that removes his injury. Or a hero cursed with goat hooves could break the curse by wearing a magical crown. This effect is triggered by spending a Legend point.



Rolling a 7 can cause a Gift to become lost or broken in the course of the adventure. Legend points may be spent to negate this effect.

Spending a Legend point also allows the hero to use his Gift to re-roll a failed die roll. The decision to use the Gift may be made after the roll (though the effects may be retroactively narrated). If the hero elects to use the Gift in response to a curse, the roll automatically succeeds but the hero still suffers a terrible fate. Spending another Legend point will negate the curse as normal.

Like Servants, Gifts are always described using an adjective (such as Golden Hair, a Diamond Bracelet or a Long Spear). Gifts can also take the form of blessings (usually from parents or priests).

Legend Points

Legend points represent the bogatyr's fame and fortune. A Legend point may be spent to activate a Servant or Gift or to add one die to a die roll (though the hero can never roll more than three dice at a time).

Legend points are gained whenever the player rolls three 1's, three 6's or when the hero accomplishes a legendary goal (such as slaying a dragon or winning the hand of a princess). This goal is usually the focus of a game session, meaning that each game awards at least 1 Legend point per hero.

All bogatyr start with 1 Legend Point.



Combat

Combat is accomplished with two die rolls.

Courage/Grace is used to attack an opponent using lance, blade or club. If the roll is successful, a Strength/Beauty roll must be made to wound or slay the opponent.

If the roll is a success, the opponent suffers a number of wounds equal to the roll. If this roll failed, the enemy rebuffed the attack but may not attack the hero.

If the Courage/Grace roll failed, then a second roll must be made using Guile/Charm to avoid harm. This time, the hero suffers wounds on a failed roll (the number dictated by the die roll). On a success, injury is avoided. If the hero rolls a 7, then he or she is mortally wounded and will die at the end of the session (or when dramatically appropriate) unless the player spends a Legend Point. Servants may also die in this manner if used to fight battles in the hero's place.

Wounds

Bogatyr may suffer only 21 Wounds (or one mortal wound) before dying. Enemies have varying numbers of wounds depending on their size, strength and nature (a bear can take more wounds than a wolf, a dragon can take more wounds than a bear). Wounds are healed at the end of a quest. Spending a Legend point can also heal 1d6 Wounds.

Moist Mother Earth

In Russian folklore, the fallen hero derives supernatural strength through contact (both physical and spiritual) with wet earth or mud (literally, "moist Mother Earth"). In this manner, the bogatyr's strength can double, enabling him to fight on against all odds. Mud represents strength in other ways as well. In the story of the bogatyr *Sukhman Sukhmatievich*, the Deep River tells Sukhman that its water is muddy because it has worked all night to destroy the bridges of the Tartars.

As a symbol of strength, any bogatyr that falls in battle (from suffering 21 or more Wounds or from suffering a mortal wound) and is able to touch wet earth may make a second Strength or Beauty roll to recover. Success means that the hero heals a number of Wounds equal to the number rolled and gains a Legend Point. Anyone witnessing this event also gains a Legend point.



Dragons

Russian dragons (*zmey*) are often multi-headed beasts (usually 3, 7 or 9 heads) with the power of speech, flight, and magical abilities. Some breathe fire, others possess poisonous spittle. Not all the *zmey* are evil, but they're all dangerous and quick to anger.

Dragons rule their lands as petty tyrants, destroying what angers them and demanding large tributes of maidens (to wed or eat, depending on their moods), gold, gems and livestock. They're rarely anything but ill-tempered, greedy and violent beasts although some display a crafty kind of intelligence (although these dragons are often undone by their boasting and love of riddles).

Dragon heads regenerate if severed (sealing the wound with flame prevents this) and the blood of a *zmey* is so toxic that the earth itself will refuse to absorb it (instead, the poisonous blood gathers in large pools, polluting the land and causing death to nearby plants and animals).

Besides the aforementioned dragons, there are numerous other serpents of legend, including: the black dragon *Zirmitra* (an evil god of sorcery), *Zilant* (a small, wyvern-like dragon and the symbol on the Khazan flag), and *Smok Walweski* (an evil dragon that lived by the Vistula River and preyed upon the livestock and people of Poland).

Battling a dragon is difficult, even for a group of bogatyr. Each head reduces the group's Virtues by 1 (this loss is split evenly between the bogatyr). Note that this could reduce a bogatyr's virtue to 0, meaning that Legend Points may be needed to add dice or activate Gifts or Servants.

Dragons are powerful foes and can suffer many Wounds before dying. Typically, adult *zmey* possess 10 Wounds per head (more for larger, older dragons and less for smaller dragons such as drakes, *Zilant* and wyverns).

Koschei the Deathless

Koschei is an evil, hideous spirit and a powerful sorcerer. Some say he's the personification of death (and the male counterpart to Baba Yaga). Koschei's soul is separated from his body and this grants him immortality. His soul is hidden inside a needle, which is hidden inside an egg, which is inside a duck, which is inside a hare, which is inside an iron chest which is buried beneath a green oak tree on an island in the middle of the ocean. If the chest is dug up and opened, the hare will escape. If the hare is killed, the duck will spring out and fly away. Killing the duck releases the egg and possession of the egg grants power over Koschei (although when this happens both he and his magic weaken considerably). Throwing the egg causes Koschei to be thrown about as well and breaking the needle against Koschei's forehead is the only way to kill him. Koschei is utterly immune to the effects of Gifts and Servants. He can only be killed as described above.

Baba Yaga

Baba Yaga is a hag who lives in the darkest parts of the forest and guards a magical fountain (the water is said to provide wisdom, long life or eternal youth, depending on the tale). Sometimes, Baba Yaga is a single being, other times it's the name of a host of malicious (but not necessarily evil) spirits. Baba Yaga makes her home in a chicken-legged yurt (a round hut) surrounded by a skull-topped fence. Her hut's entrance is surrounded by sharp teeth and the only way to gain entrance is to say to the door, "*Turn your back to the forest, your front to me.*"



Baba Yaga flies through the air in a magical mortar and pestle and sweeps away her tracks with a broom cut from a silver birch tree. Her servants include a cat, a dog, her enchanted gate and a magical tree. Although she is seen as a villainous creature, Baba Yaga may offer help to those who are pure of heart.

Every time Baba Yaga and the heroes meet, decide if she's friend or foe by making a secret roll of three six-sided dice (on a multiple of 3 she's friendly but enigmatic toward the heroes. On any other roll she's hostile. On a roll of 7 she'll appear to be friendly but turn hostile when it serves her needs). Also, secretly choose one Virtue to which she's immune (rolling a success using this Virtue always results in failure, which is made readily apparent to the heroes as soon as the roll is made).

Baba Yaga can be defeated and driven away but not slain as she is a powerful creature of magic.



Solovey-Razboynik
(Nightingale the Robber)

Solovey is a legendary and monstrous brigand who lives deep in the forest. He enjoys hiding in trees along the road to Kiev and waylays travelers with a blast from his enchanted whistle. The sound stuns the traveler, allowing Solovey to capture, kill or rob his victim with relative ease.

Solovey's whistle can be rebuffed by making a successful Strength roll (or Stamina roll if using an Animal Servant).

Female heroes may rebuff the attack using Gifts or Servants (although their Charm may win over the robber before he has a chance to use his whistle).

Solovey may suffer 27 Wounds without dying but should he suffer more than half (13) he may try to flee into the forest.

Tartars

Warlike bandits and soldiers from the far east of Siberia and Mongolia, the Tartars are skilled and savage fighters, adept with the bow and well versed in the art of horsemanship. In this game, Tartar troops are treated as a single enemy and a lone bogotyr is usually more than capable of defeating them.

Warlords and other powerful Tartars present a much more formidable challenge and must be engaged one-on-one by the hero.

A single Tartar can take 3 Wounds (meaning that any success will slay him), a band may take up to 9 Wounds. A camp is double that (18) and an army is triple that (27). A Tartar chieftain falls between 15 and 21 Wounds.





Domovoi

These hairy gnomes are small (one to three feet tall) and resemble extremely old men with long, matted beards and dark, wrinkled skin. A Domovoi may be lured inside a newly-built house by giving the creature an old boot to sleep in or by placing a piece of bread down before the stove is moved in. Treating these spirits well guarantees good fortune and safety. Treating them poorly means trouble! Domovoi are temperamental creatures and may

torment livestock, pets and people he doesn't like. Salted bread wrapped in white linen may appease an angry spirit and putting clean linen in his room is an invitation to join the family for meals. Domovoi also enjoy old shoes and hanging them outside pleases the gnomes for some reason.

Domovoi can see into the future and often use this ability to warn their adoptive families of danger or alert them to good tidings (for a woman, having one pull your hair is a warning that you'll meet an abusive man while seeing a Domovoi strum a comb means that a wedding is imminent). The Domovoi howl and cry when death is near and a laughing Domovoi is a sign of good fortune and happy times.

Domovoi are far too clever to be hurt by mere mortals but they may be chased out or tricked (of course, they pay ill will back threefold!)

Leszi

The Leszi ("leshy") are woodland spirits resembling tall, hairy men with tails, horns and hooves. They dwell in the forests amidst wolves and bears and guard over their lands with fearsome dedication. They typically carry large wooden clubs as weapons and are skilled shape-shifters (able to turn into any plant or animal). They sometimes appear as peasants, though their glowing eyes and backwards-facing shoes can give them away. Farmers and shepherds are known to strike deals with the Leszi in order to protect their flocks or crops (this often involves tributes of maidens or infants).



Leszi can take up to 15 Wounds and powerful creatures may have Gifts or Servants of their own (they have only one Legend Point to spend).

Folk Animals

Animals in Russian folklore possess archetypal personalities (and players may wish to nickname their bogatyr after animals with which they share certain traits).

Wolves (*volk*) are greedy but clever, and always male (the Russian word for wolf is "volk," a masculine noun). Foxes (*lisa*) are sly, calculating, and tricksters and always female. Cats (*kot*) are opportunistic, lazy and always male. Bears (*medved*) are big, clumsy oafs and are always male. *Misha* (the diminutive of *Mikhail*, a common first name for bears in these tales) is the same as "teddy bear." Hares (*zaiats*) are quick, cowardly and male, Goats (*koza*) are cunning and female and Roosters (*petukh*) are cocky and boastful.

Folk animals have wounds according to their sizes. Small animals have 3 Wounds, medium-sized animals have 6 Wounds and large animals have 9 Wounds. Magical or otherwise extraordinary animals may have double their normal Wounds (for example, a magical horse would have 18 Wounds).

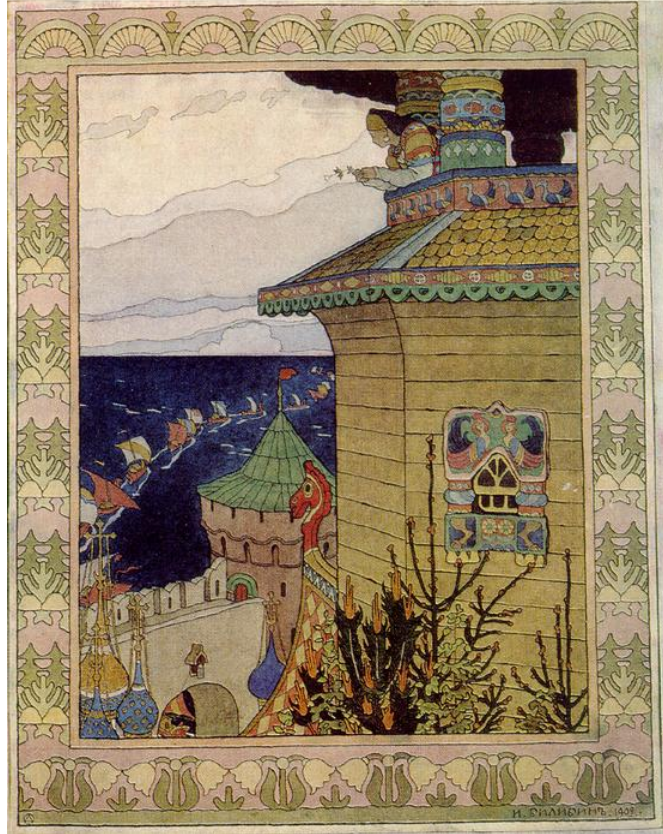
Players wishing to play a more fantastic game may substitute animal characters as their bogatyr. The male/female rules apply but instead of Servants or Gifts they gain the Animal Virtues of Speed, Stamina and Wisdom. Obviously some animals (like bears) should possess certain Virtues over others.



Adventures in 11th century Russia

Prince Vladimir “the Red Sun” is the ruler of Kiev during this time of *Bylina & Bogatyr* (sometime between the 10th and 11th centuries). But really, he’s a minor character in the adventures and his role is to send out the heroes on quests of some kind or another.

Quests and other heroic adventures typically begin with a feast of some kind. During this opening scene, a singer (*Skazitel*) may relate the exploits of the bogatyrs or the heroes may be instructed to fulfill some heroic deed (this may be a challenge, like “Bring back a pure white swan for the Prince” or an actual heroic quest like, “Rescue seven maidens imprisoned in the highest of the three towers of the castle of the malachite dragon, *Zmey Zelenyj.*”)



The next stage of the adventure is usually a choice between three paths (literal or figurative) and is often marked by an inscribed stone at a crossroads. Typically, the message tells the hero that of the three paths, one path poses a danger to the hero, one path is dangerous for his horse and the third involves a maiden or danger to both hero and steed (and is thus the obvious choice for the brave bogatyr!).

The next stage marks the trial of the hero. This is where the meat of the adventure lies and usually where all the action happens. Servants are found, Gifts are awarded, maidens are romanced and villains are vanquished.

The final passage is either one of triumph or tragedy. A great many stories end in the death of the hero, through some noble self-sacrifice or almost comedic fatalism (such as the hero who, when trapped in a stone coffin, simply requested to his comrade that his horse be tied nearby so that both man and beast would perish together). If the story ends in triumph, it probably ends in another feast and/or a wedding and/or the start of a brand new quest.



Russian Terms

The following list is a selection of terms taken from a Russian folk tale I found on the web at <http://user.aol.com/MHoll/Tales/> -- much of the research was done (and done quickly!) at this site and at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>.

- **Grandmother:** babushka, also used an informal albeit polite way to address a woman of advanced years.
- **Russian:** As stories move in and out of the “magical world,” some beings may refer to the characters as Russians (meaning, “you’re not from here, you’re from the real world.”).
- **Wolf fodder, bag of grass:** impolite terms for a horse
- **Pancakes:** Bliny, savory pancakes eaten with fish, cavier and/or sour cream
- **Bath:** a sauna-like area, not a bathtub or bathhouse
- **“Watch the Geese”:** do something unimportant and un-warriorlike
- **Weddings:** Betrothed couples exchange rings. At the wedding, crowns are held over the heads of the bride and groom.
- **Hospitality:** “Come eat salt and bread with me” is a common way to welcome someone into your home
- **Caftan:** a knee-length coat, usually of heavy, embroidered fabric
- **Swan:** a delicacy at feasts and usually the subject of hunting parties
- **Log house:** also called an *izba*, a typical Russian dwelling in the country
- **Castle:** *tarem*, also the word for a tower or large, tall dwelling
- **Horses:** typically, the Russian hero breaks his own horse instead of accepting a trained, stabled horse. This represents the wild spirit of the bogatyr and his dominance over nature.
- **Nobles:** *Boyars*, land-holding members of nobility who support the Prince’s rule