

Heroes Die

Ingredients: Steel (swords and sorcery), Actor (obvious), and Team (the players play the single character as a team); single 2-hr session

Credit for the idea and title to the author of the novel Heroes Die – Matthew Woodring Stover

Background

There are worlds apart from our own, where the laws of physics play out a different tune. Many of them cannot be visited – the way things work are simply too bizarre. But some can be visited, and in these places, sometimes things are different *enough* that what you could do, you can only call magic. One of these places even has mankind – a place called Overworld, it looks like heroic fantasy brought to life.

The industrial revolution hasn't reached Overworld; there is no overpopulation, little pollution, vast tracts of wilderness populated with strange and wonderful beasts. "Magic" in countless variation exists on every level, the worshipped gods are still active, and there is even nonhuman sapience distressingly similar to 'elves'. It is truly a swords and sorcery place, perhaps the inspiration somehow for the earliest fantasy stories.

In the future, we have found Overworld (and gave it the name), and we know how to get there. Unfortunately, it cannot be colonized – if people stays too long, they finds themselves being pulled back 'home' to their original dimension, passing through hundreds of uninhabitable ones along the way. It is an unpleasant, painful experience nobody has survived. So what do we do with this place? Why do we care?

The Studio has an answer – entertainment. *Bloody* entertainment. "Actors" trained like secret agents in the languages and cultures of Overworld, are thrown across the dimensional void and given tasks called Adventures, Adventures which in turn are broadcast back through special cybernetic brain implants – all five senses recorded for the consumers to experience later, or for the right price, immediately. Actors are drilled in using weapons and magic – swords and sorcery.

The viewers get to feel the visceral thrill of adventuring – of having sorcery flow through their veins, of slicing someone with cold steel, perhaps even of dying. The producers get huge profits, sculpt huge storylines, and keep their position at the top. Actors get paid very well, and get the lion's share of the fame, but in return risk their lives constantly – many Actors don't get past their first few productions, dying unceremoniously in some foolhardy producer stunt or another.

As for the people of Overworld? Well, their lives are made more interesting, but not always in a good way. Stable governments and peace don't make for good ratings – Actors, following producer orders, have done more to keep the political situation of Overworld chaotic than its natives ever have. Furthermore, in the early days, before they learned better, Actors were sloppy – now, the people of Overworld tell tales of the mysterious *Aktiri*, and keep an eye out for their activities. Not a few natives have fallen in Aktiri pogroms, much more than actual Actors. Either way, it's great for ratings.

In **Heroes Die**, the players create an Actor, and lead him through one of his productions. Actors are usually solo efforts – they get their own titles. Sometimes there are “cross-over” productions, where Actors work together, but these are rare. The danger in being targeted as an *Aktiri* is greater when you’re amongst your own kind, and while death gets great ratings, long-lived Actors with extensive track records and histories bring in more money over the long run. Each production is a calculated risk.

Actor

Each game of **Heroes Die** involves one Actor, who is played by all the players at various times. Play is expected to take about two hours, and requires at least 3 players. You will need a deck of standard playing cards, and some scrap paper (or a nifty official production sheet that you can download and print off). If you play this game multiple times, you can use the same Actor, or create a new one.

Actors are measured by three traits on a scale of 0 to 10, which correspond to three of the four suits of cards (the fourth suit, Spades, are somewhat of a trump or wild card, and will be described later). Every action taken can make these values go up or down, and often will. Higher values are always better. Every time the Actor tries something, all three of these will be checked and often affected. Be careful! If any one of them reaches zero, the Actor is in serious danger.

- **Ratings** (Hearts) – The Ratings trait tracks how much the viewers are enjoying the Actor’s performances and experiences.
- **Studio** (Diamond) – The Studio trait tracks how much the producers approve of the Actor and what he’s doing in Overworld.
- **Notoriety** (Clubs) – This tracks how much impact the Actor has on the natives of Overworld – in this case, the lower the number, the more negative impact and infamy the Actor has.

Note that there’s nothing on the sheet regarding the Actor’s ability to actually *do things*. Actors are assumed to have been trained to be as well-rounded and all-capable as action heroes. There is never a question as to whether or not an Actor can do something – only to how much of a challenge it is for him (or her) to do it, and what the fallout is on these three traits.

New Actors always begin with a Notoriety score of 10 since nobody on Overworld has even heard of them yet – and both Ratings and Studio scores of 1, since nobody watching them has heard of them yet either. Of course, if you’re playing with an experienced Actor from previous games, you will start with the same statistics the Actor had at the end of his last production. Use a new production sheet, since you’ll have a whole new set of Lines you’ll want to track!

Playing

At the start of the game, every player draws five cards. The player with the highest hand is the Actor, and gets to play the Actor in the scene. The player with the next highest hand is the Producer, and has the responsibility for setting up and ending the scene.

Once this is decided, the Producer sets the scene as well as the task the Actor is told to fulfill. The Actor then takes this information and starts playing the Actor in scene, and the Producer decides what happens as a result. As this happens, any other player can choose to challenge the Actor, by introducing story elements – things to which the Actor must respond. Each story element requires spending a card from their hand, to which the Actor must respond with a card from their own hand.

If two or more players wish to challenge the Actor, the privilege goes to the one that played their card first. The other players may challenge at the conclusion of the event. If there is a question as to which player went first, the Actor has the final decision.

The player with the higher card value wins the challenge – face cards are always worth 10, Aces 1. On a tie, both cards are discarded and the challenger must throw down a new card if he has one (or, if he's empty, draw the top card in the deck instead), and the Actor must respond with one of his own.

The Producer's role in this conflict is special – they may contribute an additional card to either side of the conflict, if they so choose. Their card does not replace the other card, but instead, the higher of the two cards is used to determine winnings, including narration rights (if the producer causes a tie, he must throw down against the opposite party, but the side he supports doesn't have to). *Both* cards are used for comparison against traits, as described below.

If the challenger threw down a card whose suit corresponds with one of the three traits, and the Actor does not respond with that same suit, the trait goes down by one. On the other hand, if the card the Actor throws down is one of the three traits, and is *higher* than that trait, it goes up by one, regardless of the suit of the challenger's card. The Producer's card is treated as an additional challenger, or an additional Actor, depending on which side it is supporting, and the other side must compare its suit and number against *both* these cards. Thus, all 3 traits might very well change in one challenge.

The winner may narrate the result of the challenge however they desire, and draws a card. The Actor then replenishes his hands to five cards. The winner must then add a Line to the production sheet – a one or two sentence summary of what just occurred. Put your initials at the end of the Line. Watch how many Lines are left in the production, so you can pace the story appropriately.

When another player empties their hand of cards, they become the Actor and take over that role. The discard pile is shuffled into the deck, they get to draw five more cards, and the Producer narrates the scene ending. The previous Actor then becomes the Producer, and sets up the next scene.

If ever one of the traits on the production sheet is zero at the end of a scene, the game is over. If Notoriety reaches zero, the Actor has somehow been discovered, and is killed by the locals as one of the Aktiri. If Studio reaches zero, the Actor has pissed his producers off one too many times, and is either sacked unceremoniously, or sent to his death. If Ratings reaches zero, nobody will watch him anymore – he retires to obscurity. Otherwise, the game ends when the production has gathered 26 Lines.

The person with the most Lines gets top billing, and is allowed to name the Production.

In an average game, there's about 4 minutes between Lines – add the occasional scene setup, Actor changes, bathroom breaks and conversational tangents, and this means the production will last more or less two hours. For a longer game, collect more Lines (a second page is available with up to 57 lines). For a shorter game, collect less Lines. However, always decide on the number of Lines before the game begins.

Production: _____ **Actor:** _____

Ratings

Studio

Notoriety

Lines

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