

ZOTHIQUE

THE LAST CONTINENT



**A DECADENT ROLE-PLAYING GAME
BASED ON THE WORKS OF C. A. SMITH**

PRESENTATION

■ 1.1 - INTRODUCTION

Based on a cycle of 16 novels, a play and some unfinished fragments, all written by C. A. Smith, *Zothique – The last continent (ZLC)* pictures an agonizing, decadent world – our own planet lit by a huge crimson sun at the end of its existence.

Throughout the centuries, the desert has slowly devoured kingdoms, buried cities and people into the sands of oblivion. The end of the world is now near and it is time for decadence and excess in search of strange amusements to try to hide this slow but inexorable agony.

On Zothique, magic, witchcraft and necromancy have replaced science. Old forgotten gods have descended from the stars or surfaced from the depths, to judge man's last days. Declining humanity has returned to the dark legendary ages which prevailed during its origins.

■ 1.2 - A LAST STORY

In **Avandas**, capital city of **Dooza Thom**, man's last kingdom on Zothique, young King **Adranogh** recieved with awesome calm confirmation from his astrologers that the sun would vanish forever during his own reign.

The King immediately ordered a last carnival, so that both rich and poor could forget the imminent end of mankind in a storm of sensations altering all of their

senses. But at court, the King wishes to exorcise the coming void in a different way. The present era spent in boredom and the illusory search for superficial amusement no longer interests him and he takes no pleasure in joining the debauchery of his subjects. Adranogh thinks with envy of Zothique's past and dreams of reliving the lives of his glorious ancestors through tales and imagination.

Progressively, together with **Antarion** the poet, they spend long sleepless nights recreating role-playing which enables them to fulfill their wish of reliving the grand and decadent times of Zothique's **Old Kingdoms**.

Touched by the distress of Adranogh, the poet eventually becomes caught up in the game. Invited by his King, he embarks on a long voyage which lasts a year during which he roams all over the Continent seeking every trace of Zothique's past, crucial to the reconstruction of the game's world.

At the end of his wandering, the poet succeeds in extracting the Old Kingdoms from the sands of oblivion and recreating Adranogh's favorite era.

Soon the court is presented with a game invented by the poet. Antarion explains the rules to his listeners, gives examples to illustrate certain points and then describes the forgotten kingdoms in a wealth of details.

This account is the book of the game which you now hold in your hands...

■ 1.3 - THE PLAYERS

In **ZLC**, players portray characters in the court of King Adranogh : noblemen, courtiers, soldiers etc. Weariness stops them from taking part in the frantic celebrations of the citizens of Avandas who for over a year have thronged the streets ; curiosity brought them to the throne-room to listen to Antarion the poet. He is back from a long journey and presents the king and the assembly with a new way to overcome the boredom and fear of the imminent end : a new game, a distraction halfway between a play and a tale.

Like the King, the court members (portrayed by the players) are impatient to hear the account of Antarion (played by the gamemaster). The poet returned a few weeks ago from his year long journey to the most remote corners of the Continent, crossing seas and deserts, exploring crumbling cities and necropolises, collecting evidence, tales and objects of Zothique's past. He thus ensured that the setting of the game would be as close to reality and history as possible, in accordance with Adranogh's wishes.

■ 1.4 - A GAME WITHIN A GAME

Players portray characters of the decadent court of young King Adranogh, who overcomes his boredom and anguish through role-playing. The characters of the players then create other characters to take the part of the traditional warriors, adventurers, magicians in role-playing games, and other characters specific to C.A. Smith's world (courtesans, eunuchs, sorcerers ...)

The first character created by each player gravitates around Adranogh's throne and is called the **role**.

The characters portrayed by the role at the time of the Ancient Kingdoms are called **archetypes**.

In fact, in **ZLC** the player has a first imaginary character which he retains throughout the game. This character is a nobleman at Avandas' court and is used at the beginning of each game. This first character is defined by a few quick rules ; he never fights or sets out on an adventure like standard role-playing characters. His only function is to enable the player to choose the different arche-

types he wishes to play in the different tales (settings). The archetypes, the second imaginary characters in the game, are the « real heroes », normally portrayed by players in a standard role-playing game. The roles are then momentarily set aside. At the end of the tale, they can be revived for a conclusion, a scene which ends the game.

■ 1.5 - THE ARCHETYPES

The *Zothique* cycle novels show heroes embroiled in strange and fascinating adventures, involving many trials and tribulations ending in oblivion and often death. C. A. Smith presents heroes, who experience the biggest adventure of their lives, which leads them inexorably to face the tragic destiny the gods assigned them.

In the same way, in **ZLC** the players are invited to create a rapid succession of original characters (rich, poor, powerful) who experience their hour of glory through a tale and then vanish into oblivion. The characters of **ZLC** resemble the heroes of *1001 Nights* : in one adventure they meet their destiny, whether glorious, magnificent or tragic and miserable.

To the players, the aim is no longer, as in other role-playing games, to accompany the same character as it develops throughout different scenarios. In **ZLC** the players are invited to portray many different characters. One will find close to a 100 different occupations for the archetypes (king, emperor, sorcerer, embalmer, merchant, eunuch, beggar...). Each archetype can be played at a different stage in life (child, adult, old man) and the players can choose between five different ethnic groups (desertnomads, sailors from the Southern Islands, cannibals from islands located at the edge of the world, representatives of the Ancient race, or torturers of the island of Uccastrog).

The different combinations will give the players the opportunity, unlike other traditional role-playing games, to portray many unusual characters. Why not represent in the space of one tale a rich eunuch, the chief of a royal harem, a young leper condemned to survive in the desert, a cruel Torturer-surgeon of the damned island of Uccastrog, an old imperial astrologer, or even a cannibal queen whose legendary beauty crossed the seas ?

■ 1.6 - GODS, DESTINY AND HUBRIS

It is rare for a hero of C. A. Smith to escape death or destiny foreseen in a prophecy : on Zothique men are pawns of the gods as in ancient Greece. Since the beginning of the Continent, the powers of the gods have been vast and the considerable influence they exert on humanity created a strange mixture of envy and fear which men experienced when faced with the unknown.

Throughout the history of Zothique, there were few people who mastered their own destiny. Since childhood, man is aware of his weakness faced with divine powers. He awaits the tragic events which put a sudden end to his life.

The common belief held by all the people on the Continent is that any encounter, event or human action is the result of divine design or intervention. From birth to death, man living on Zothique has the illusion of free choice ; but in fact he is a pawn moved around by the gods on the chessboard of life, according to obscure rules.

The gods fear only one entity, Vergama, a mysterious personification of destiny to whom all things and beings

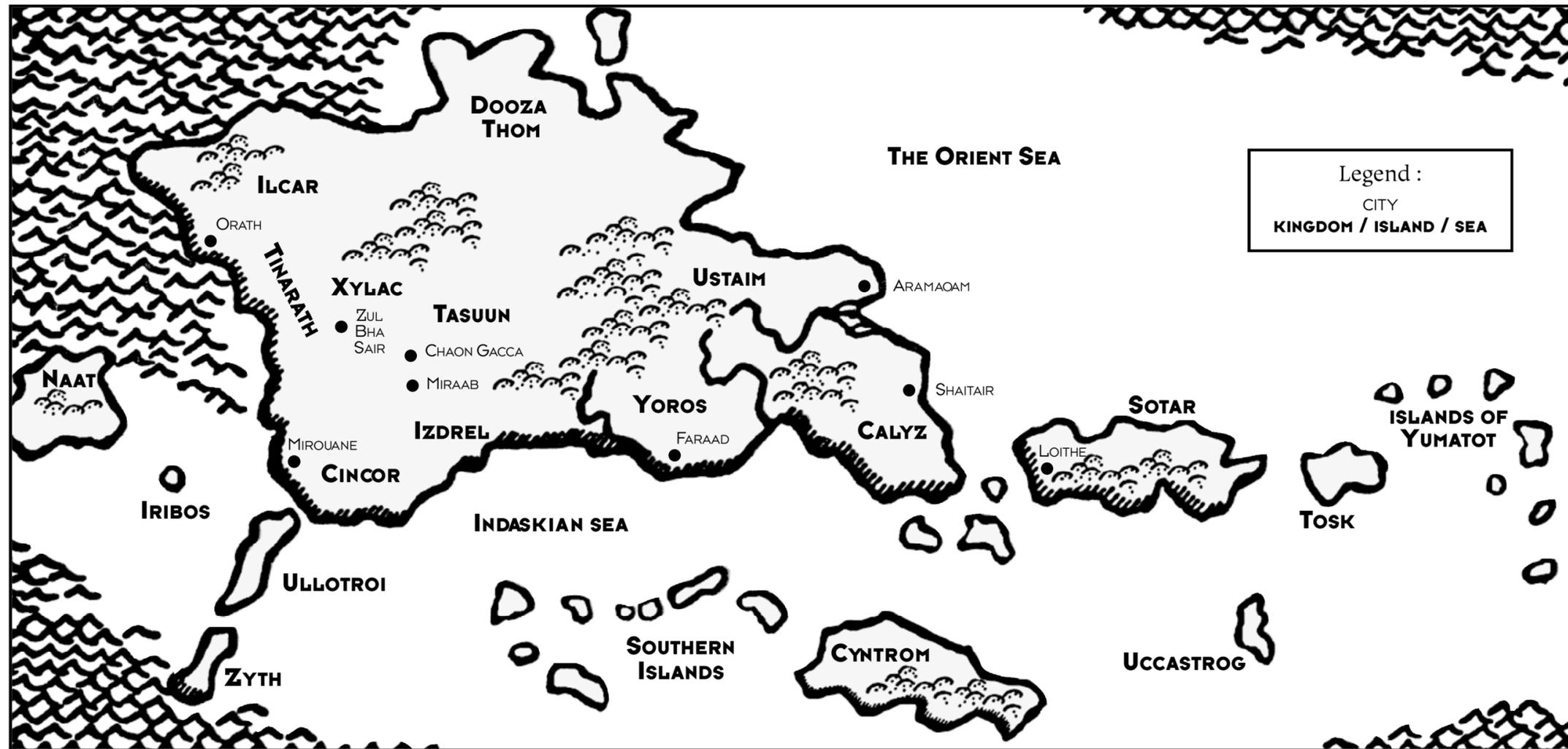
on Zothique must subject themselves. In the gigantic book held open on his knees by Vergama for eternity, all creatures, objects, stars, humans and gods can be found, represented as hieroglyphs.

The common belief is that all things and all beings are at the beginning a simple sign in Vergama's book, which borrows a life during its existence, then returns to eternal oblivion - a drawing lost in the pages of destiny.

Hubris is the ancient Greek word describing man's actions when they impinge on divine spheres, which, because of his mortal nature, he has no claim to. He thereby faces the wrath of the gods for overstepping his role, disobeying a divine order, or more generally, refusing to fulfill his destiny, predetermined long before his birth.

In **ZLC** the characters often make themselves guilty of such crimes and have to pay dearly for the price of their pride. Those who most readily succumb to temptation are those using the ancient art of dark magic, sorcery and necromancy, and those who sign a pact with demons and higher powers. They receive great powers (magic on Zothique is a powerful weapon) but they have to pay a terrible price.

MAP OF ZOTHIQUE AT THE TIME OF THE OLD KINGDOMS.



MAP OF ZOTHIQUE DRAWN BY LIN CARTER,
 BASED UPON INFORMATION IN THE STORIES OF C. A. SMITH,
 AND UPON A PREVIOUS SKETCH BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP,
 CORRECTED AND APPROVED BY C. A. SMITH.

BASIC RULES

■ 2.1 - CREATION OF THE ROLE

In **ZLC** the player belongs to the ruling class of Avandas, ranging from the smallest nobelman to the king's chamberlain. The player determines the function of his role in the palace.

Amongst the possible occupations, one must imagine those that might have existed in a decadent court, half way between *1001 Nights* and ancient civilisations (Babylonia, Persia or Egypt).

■ 2.2 - CREATION OF THE ARCHETYPE

The creation of the archetype depends on the vision that the people of **ZLC** have of mankind (let us not forget that **ZLC** was written by one of them).

First, the player must determine the proportion of the 3 essential *elements* (Soul, Spirit and Life) which make up a human being.

Each element is located in a specific place of the body called a *receptacle* (the Heart for the Soul, the Head for the Spirit and the Body for Life).

Specific *fluids* (Breath for the Soul, Bile for the Spirit and Blood for Life) are responsible for mixing the elements together and thereby create the nine human *moods* (Influence, Will, Sensitivity, Communication, Intelligence, Perception, Strength, Dexterity and Constitution). These moods are determined by numbers according **ZLC's** rules.

Players can then choose between 5 different *Ages* for their archetype (child, adolescent, young man, man, old man) and five different *Races* (Ancient race, People of the desert, Men of the Southern Islands, Torturer of Uccastrog and Savage people), and 100 occupations. All this influences the choice and calculation of their skills.

At the end of his creation, the archetype has a score from 1 to 10 for his moods and skills.

■ 2.3 - BASIC PRINCIPLES

The rules of **ZLC** are simple. Everything is determined by two ten sided dice. A character who wants to try an action must do so using the score of one of his skill or mood. The gamemaster adds plus or minus points, symbolizing the difficulty of the action. The player adds the difficulty to the score to obtain a final score. He then throws both dice.

The first die shows whether the archetype has succeeded or failed in his action (he has succeeded if the number shown by the die is smaller or equal to the final score ; otherwise he has failed).

The second die indicates the quality of the result on a scale of 1 (bad) to 5 (excellent) : 1 or 2 corresponds to Level 1 ; 3 or 4 corresponds to Level 2, etc. This Level is a Level of success or failure, depending on the result of the first die. These Levels will help the gamemaster interpret the archetypes' actions.

Example :

An archetype wants to overcome an obstacle. His Dexterity score is 4. The gamemaster gives the action a minus point of -1 ; the final score then becomes 3. The player throws two dice and gets a 7 and a 4. It is a Level 2 failure (7 is higher than the final score of 4). For the gamemaster, it means that the archetype has stumbled over the obstacle, lost time but did not get hurt ; he informs the player.

■ 2.4 - COMBAT

In **ZLC** combat is deadly. At the beginning of each Combat sequence, a two dice *Initiative roll* determines when each opponent may attack.

A Combat sequence is divided into three *Phases* : the Beginning, the Middle and the End. Depending on the result of the roll, one can act within one, two, all... or none of the three Phases.

In each Phase, those who can act must choose between a *Simple action* (hit, jump, etc.) or a *Complex one* (move, pick up an object, etc.). Simple actions take place before Complex actions. Similar actions take place simultaneously. The gamemaster supervises the players' encounters Phase after Phase. At the end of the three

Phases a new Combat sequence takes place and a new Initiative roll is required.

Within a Phase, opponents are confronted with combat skills (attack or defense). The player with the highest Level of success wounds his adversary. The type of weapon is then taken into consideration, so is the strength of the attacker and the protection of his opponent. Finally, the location of the wound is determined (chest, head, legs, etc.) ; and a table of injuries indicates how serious a wound is (from a simple scratch to certain death).

■ 2.5 - MAGIC

The Obscure Arts in **ZLC** take three different *Ways* : Magic, Witchcraft and Necromancy. Each Way can be used with three different *Methods* : Incantations, Parchements and Powders.

Any archetype who chooses to devote himself to the Obscure Arts must undergo a period of apprenticeship when a master teaches him the basics of magic. His learning path will be long and dangerous.

The power of the different skills varies and can be extremely potent (up to the point of destroying a city or a kingdom). But the greater a magician becomes, the more he will attract the attention of the gods, and the worse his fall will be.

BACKGROUND

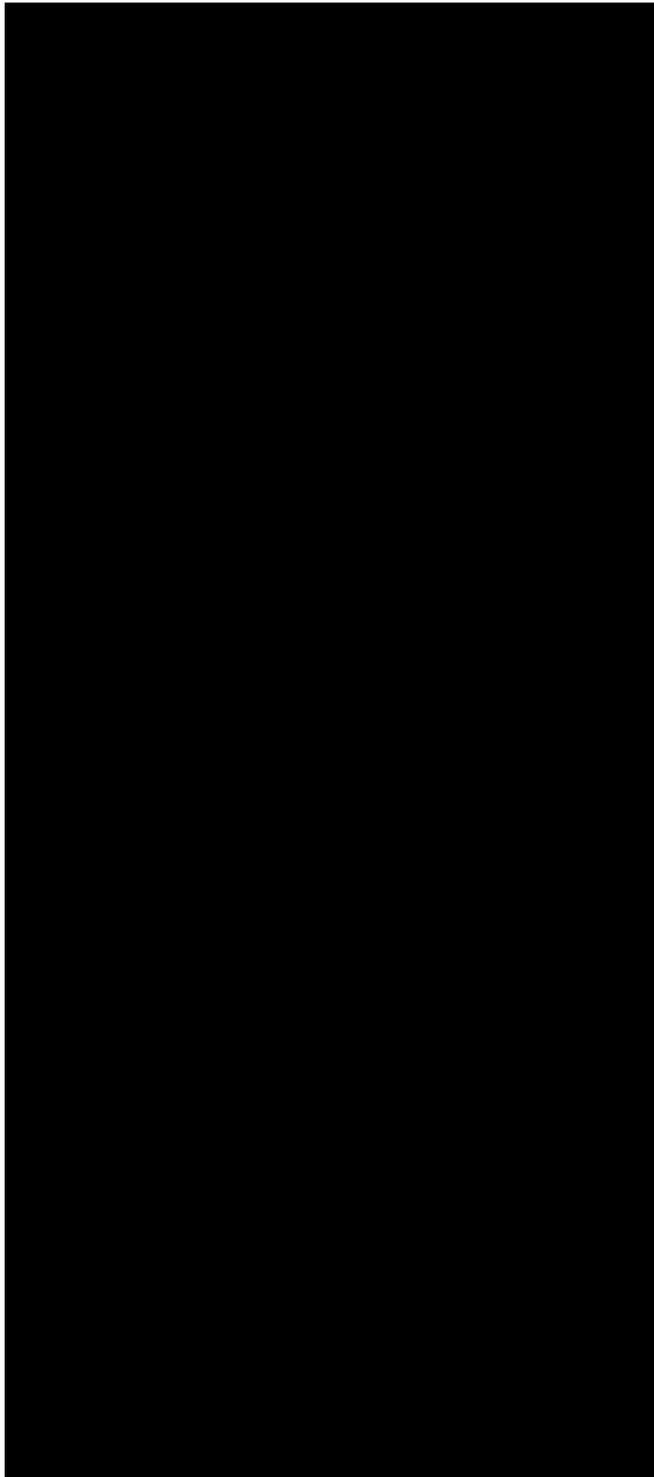
ZLC takes place at the time of greatest folly and decadence on the Continent, the era of the Ancient Kingdoms. Players discover the empires of Tasuun, Yoros and Ustaim. They explore the islands of Sotar and Cyn-trom. They may be unfortunate enough to encounter the Black River which will undoubtedly cause them to be shipwrecked on the shores of the island of Naat, the home of cruel necromancers.

Players play the part of proud desert Nomads, superstitious Sailors from the Southern Islands, fierce Cannibals from islands located at the edge of the world, noble representatives of the Ancient race, or ferocious Torturers of the island of Uccastrog.

They will encounter numerous obstacles : monsters leaping out of ancient ruins buried under the desert sands, demons from space riding comets through the Abyss, cruel necromancers and courtisans as beautiful as the night and as dangerous as its shadows...

Zothique is a cruel and dangerous world that radiates with a special beauty, the beauty of things at the very dawn of their existence. Here everything is exacerbated, deformed and amplified : color, smell, feelings and behaviour.

It is a world beyond measure, a strange experiment on the thin edge between dream and nightmare...



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