

Busiris RPG – Game Master’s Companion

Introduction

Becoming a Games Master (GM) in Busiris can be great fun, especially when everyone is enjoying themselves. The real key to doing this is to be relaxed about the game and its rules. Never let a rule get in the way of the story or people having fun.

As the GM you should follow three simple laws:

1. Having Fun is more important than any rule,
2. KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid), and
3. Rules are for the guidance of wise men and the obedience of fools.

As you read Busiris you will quickly realize that there aren’t rules for every eventuality. The desire to do this is what has led many games companies to create rulebooks that are hundreds of pages long. People who have been games masters in some of the commercial role-playing games may have a bit of unlearning to do.

So when your players come up with a new way to risk their Adventurers’ lives you will have to assess their chances of success on the spot.

Never say something is impossible, instead point out the obvious risks and ask how they intend to get around these. Once you have this information you can decide whether they succeed automatically, or if they need to make some sort of dice roll.

Creating Adventurers

The key to letting players create adventurers is just that, to let them. The system is designed to make the whole thing one of choice. The players can choose their adventurer’s Attributes, Race, Training, Profession and Equipment. There is enough variety in the process to give everyone a completely unique adventurer to play.

Two areas in which you can advise them though are these:

1. Encourage them to give their adventurer a name and a back story - just a few lines on where they came from and why they are adventuring. The full character of their adventurer will come out in play.
2. Party Balance. It may be fun for your players to run a party full of Soldiers or Thieves but what happens the first time they get injured or come up against a trap or foul magic? Don't push them, but ask if they had thought of that...

Using Skills & Abilities

Unlike many systems the skills in Busiris are both abstract and extremely adaptable. This allows you to call on them to cover a multitude of situations.

Always let the player know which skill you will want them to roll against in a specific situation. This may guide their choice of actions.

Where there really is no suitable skill then ask them to roll using a suitable attribute doubled. For example a Soldier wants to overturn a wagon to block an alleyway and help his friends escape. There is no skill for this simple feat of strength, so tell him he can roll against double his STR. If the wagon is heavily laden tell him to roll against his unmodified STR.

Running the game

Really the main skill required of a GM is the ability to let the players play. Their creativity may well amaze you. You are waiting for the ‘but’ aren’t you? Well there is just one... 'but' players enjoy a challenge, so never, ever make it easy. Make their Adventurers pay in blood, sweat, puns and silver for their successes.

For the players you are the scene setter. When they enter an area describe what they can immediately see, hear and smell. Keep it brief and to the facts. Then let them explore by asking questions and moving their figures about. Don't worry about movement rates etc. Just let them play it through.

The moment things get hazardous or interesting then you can drop them into the system of turns. So when the dumb Fighter stands in the trap, or the thief fails to disarm it, or the Priest opens a door to reveal six surprised Orcs it's party time!

Movement

The main guiding principle for movement must be the application of common sense. That said this is a heroic fantasy game so you should allow, or even encourage the players to attempt many of the moves they have seen in films, such as swinging from chandeliers, running along tables, diving into deep moats, fighting from the spar of a sailing ship or between a chariot’s horses.

If a player puts a move to you that seems reasonable then just let them do it. If it seems fraught with danger then tell them that and propose a suitable roll. They can then decide if they will risk it. If they fail then make their failure cinematic, such as falling into a pile of manure, or an Prince’s lap, or perhaps through a roof below and into a lady’s bed. Don’t punish people for trying to have fun.

If you think this is mad go and watch The Three Musketeers, Prince of Persia or Pirates of the Caribbean and tell us you didn’t just love those dramatic fight scenes.

Bloody Combat

Combat is chaos. The rules only sketch it out in terms of who can hit who and when, so fill in the blanks, add a little descriptive colour. When the Nubian Guard get's skewered have him scream in pain and fury, have blood spurt across the room making the floor slick with gore.

Don't worry about little details, let the adventurers be heroes, it's what the players are there for. However, remember the 'but' above.

The most important rule in the whole section on combat is the Knock Out or KO. The concept of not immediately killing people but letting them get KO'd is another cinematic rule. This offers a lot more roleplaying options than simply slaughtering them. When was the last time you saw a D&D party get captured, or surrender rather than watch a downed friend have his throat slit?

As the GM we are sure you can think of much more entertaining uses for a downed adventurer than simply killing them. Most enemies will not finish off a Adventurer if there are other Adventurers still alive to fight. After all their Master might want the Adventurer alive to:

1. use as a slave in their mines (Breakout Mission!),
2. sacrifice to their evil gods (Rescue Mission!),
3. ransom back to his friends (Gotta get lots of cash Mission!), and
4. eat later... (Catering Mission?).

Adventurers will have to remember to go around and finish off their KO'd enemies at the end of a fight, otherwise the enemy’ friends will come and get them after the Adventurers leave, and then heal them. There again keeping one alive may be useful as a:

1. Guide, to find out what lies ahead.
2. Porter, to carry away all that treasure.
3. Trap finder...

Of course any captives will have to be guarded.

Other Ways to Die

There are more ways to die than sliding off an enemy’s Tulwar. Some of these are unintentional and some are quite deliberate.

Poison: Busiris, the Great Salt Desert, the Thousand Isles and the steaming jungles of the interior are home to no end of venomous creatures. Poison can also come from the products of sinister Alchemy.

In any case if an adventurer is successfully bitten, stung, scratched, cut or fed a poison he must make an immediate Toughness Check or become KO'd.

Different poisons have different strengths. Represent this by assigning each a number from one to six that must be deducted from the victim’s Toughness before the check.

Unlike wounds a Priest’s Healing Touch has no effect on poison. A dose of Alchemist’s Purgative though will save the adventurer if administered quickly. However, recovery will take three turns, during which time they will count as wounded.

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Disease: Busiris is a well-maintained city where there is little endemic disease. However, beyond its walls all manner of pestilence exists.

As a GM you should use disease to slow down and disable the adventurers, not to kill them. Diarrhoea can be funny, Dysentery is not.

Thirst: In the Great Salt Desert thirst is a constant threat and a terrible way to die. Adventurers are hardy individuals but for each day they go without water you should reduce their STR by one point. When their STR reaches zero they are KO’d. One more day and they are vulture bait.

Basically an Adventurer needs a Waterskin of water a day if travelling, or half of one if they do nothing but lie in any shade they can make or find.

Falling: The first rule of falling is give the adventurer a chance to grab a branch, a windowsill, a ledge or a strangely convenient rope or banner on the way down. Dangling over a terrifying drop is much more fun than becoming one with the landscape.

If they fail to take the opportunity to break their fall apply the following simple rules.

Under 10’	They land OK.
11’-20’	They land heavily and are winded. They lose a round while they sort themselves out and get up.
20’-30’	They take a wound, or if already wounded are KO’d.
30’+	They are KO’d.

If they should land on another person or large animal reduce the effective distance they fell by 10’. The person they land on becomes winded.

Drowning: Another unpleasant and unheroic way to die. However, having a man underwater with his leg trapped under a broken mast can be a thrilling scenario. Note that swimming is an Agility skill.

An adventurer can hold his breath for one turn per point of STR. After that he must take a Toughness check each round or begin to drown.

When he eventually fails this check he will become immediately wounded, and the round after that KO’d.

If an adventurer is recovered within three rounds of being KO’d he can be saved. A Priest’s Healing Touch will bring him around quickly, otherwise complete recovery will take 1D6 hours.

Fire: Generally we deal with fire just like a weapon attack. Environmental fire, such as being in a blazing house causes one point of damage a turn.

Fire from a spell or monster does between two and six points.

In either case fire ignores armour and causes an immediate Toughness check, leading to wounds and KO as per usual.

Home Base

Every party needs somewhere to retreat to, to lick their wounds, trade their loot and plan their next assault on the enemy.

Inns make great bases. They have secure rooms, food, drink, merchants keen to buy loot and make a silver selling equipment and supplies.

Peeling the Onion

Unlike Dead Simple where the objective of the game is to kick down the door, kill the monsters and take their stuff, Busiris is both more subtle and more deadly.

You will have noted by now the amount of effort that has gone into describing the different forces who are trying to control the Province and the Kif monopoly.

The first few published adventures will take your players into a world of politics and intrigue. Busiris is truly a place where you should trust no-one, and everyone has an angle.

Men who were their patrons in one adventure may regard them as ‘loose ends’ in the next. The players should be encouraged to build relationships with people they meet and use these to their advantage.

Each adventure should be like an episode in a thrilling TV series. There should be obvious objectives, ones for which they will gain immediate reward if they succeed. And then there should be the at first seemingly random clues that eventually give the players a grip on the overall story arc.

Each episode should have a defined set of enemies, but amongst them is at least one who is part of the story arc. He will almost certainly be working directly, but more likely indirectly, for the Nemesis.

The Nemesis is the chief villain. At the beginning of the story arc the adventurers are just annoying pawns. By the middle of the arc they should be becoming a thorn in his side, and by the end they are his chief concern as they threaten to overturn his carefully laid plans for provincial, if not world, domination.

A good Nemesis could be the Master of Assassins of a great House. Another is an ambitious and powerful Priest. These are men and women who feel above the law and will use and discard people without remorse.

If you want to look outside the city there are numerous Ushakhti cult leaders, Mogadai Princes, Mumbatan Witch doctors, entrapped Demons, ancient Undead, rebel Ghola etc., all of whom could have their own plans for Busiris.

There are no good guys in Busiris. Where people seems to be doing good it is generally a coincidence that doing such coincides with their own plans.

Being the Enemy

Some enemies are dumb and some are not.

So play them as people too. Many may be brave but they are probably not suicidal so when things turn against them they may decide to run for it, or even surrender.

They may also have motivations the Adventurers know nothing about. Those Cultists who just won’t retreat may be defending a sacred site, not just some gold coins.

How many enemies should you use?

It takes a while for a new GM to get the feel for how many enemies he should throw at a party of Adventurers. Many games have encounter tables and challenge ratings and all that stuff. Honestly most GM’s have learnt this through trial and error.

For a new adventure with new players and new Adventurers we suggest facing them with one more weak enemy (like Red Guard, Skeletons or Zombies) than there are Adventurers. So if the party have five Adventurers, send six enemies at them.

If the party struggles with this suggest that they can retreat. If the party are finding it too easy send in some reinforcements. You are the GM after all and can summon up as many as it takes...