

## The road goes ever on.

### A variant on the tagline: the incidental anecdote.

By Steve Dempsey

Tolstoy had it that there were only two possible plots: a man goes on a journey, and a stranger comes to town. And so it is with the Dying Earth. Cugel, as the main protagonist is usually up to one of two things. Either spreading his brand of mayhem to a new town, somewhere they haven't yet had the misfortune of his endeavours, or fleeing from said town's enraged inhabitants; Cugel doesn't often visit the same place twice. Jack Vance uses this itinerant lifestyle to create ever more fanciful locations from the mud pits of Flutic to the "other cosmos" in a bag.

The Dying Earth game was written to recreate this kind of existence. Most player characters are variants on the fox-faced vagabond, forced by capitulation to their vices to find ever more new people to meet, exploit and flee. Indeed, amongst the recommendations in the adventure checklist are **strange vistas**, **crafty swindles** and **heated protests**. Whilst a GM might like to arrange for such misadventures at every location visited by the PCs on their inevitable travels, the burden would become too heavy after a while (even with such magnificent supporting material such as the Scaum Valley Gazetteer). I therefore propose an alternative for the players to taglines that will alleviate this burden and make travelogue games all the more interesting.

The basic premise is this. At any point in a game, when the PCs are undertaking a long journey that the GM does not wish to detail, a player may elect to describe an event on that journey. The GM may, if amused by the short story, elect to award the player one improvement point. On the other hand, he may not, for fortune is fickle and you may find your GM more receptive to kind words, fresh food or strong drink.

Here is an example from the master himself which serves as a frontispiece to the rules<sup>1</sup>.

*At village of Troon, the rive emptied itself into the Tsombol Marsh, and Cugel sold the skiff for ten terces. To repair his fortunes he took employment with the town butcher, performing the more distasteful tasks attendant upon the trade.*

*However, the pay was adequate and Cugel steeled himself to his undignified duties. He worked to such good effect that he was called upon to prepare the feast served at an important religious festival.*

*Through oversight, or stress of circumstance, Cugel used two sacred beasts in the preparation of his special ragout. Halfway through the banquet the mistake was discovered and once again Cugel left under a cloud.*

There are a few rules pertaining to the anecdote which I shall enunciate below.

1. **GM's veto** — the GM may refuse the anecdote out of hand (or spite even) if he wishes to move the game on more quickly. The GM may also veto the use of any particular location.
2. **Limited Licence** — the player whose anecdote this is may not cause things to happen to others' PCs without their permission. In fact, the other PCs are usually best left out of the anecdote except perhaps as an aside, such as 'whilst the others dined with gusto upon the easily won meal, Zinzan ventured out, on the trail of the priestesses'.
3. **Keep it short** — the anecdote must not take more than a few minutes to recount as with the example above.
4. **No loss nor gain** — the PC involved may not make any changes to their character sheet (except if the GM generously grants an improvement point).

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<sup>1</sup> And can be found at the start of Part V Chapter 2: The Bagful of Dreams in Cugel's Saga, page 301 in the Granada edition.

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5. **A one-roll variant** — exceptionally, the GM may allow a single roll<sup>2</sup> on a single pool appropriate to the story. The result indicates whether the PC may make some small gain, or take some small loss from the adventure. Perhaps they found an unusual dagger sheath, or lost their second best pair of boots.
  6. **In and out** — this rule indicate that the structure of an anecdote must be thus: a short introduction, a situation arises, a sudden dénouement in which the PCs must flee.
  7. **Don't over do it** — lastly, the GM will have probably spent many long hours preparing exciting encounters with madcap characters with odd customs in bizarre landscapes. Don't try to steal his thunder by insisting on an anecdote at every possible opportunity. Also, once you've had a go, it is only polite to allow the other players first refusal at the next opportunity.

Hopefully you will be able to use these ideas to fill your games with even more picaresque escapades, allowing the players to shoulder some of the creative burden that is the GM's lot.

Enjoy!

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<sup>2</sup>That is, with a limit of 0.