

## **Directing a Table-Top Pulp Adventure**

By Bob Murch, Sculptor of Pulp Figures

Let's get one thing straight right off the bat, Pulp Era games are not historical battles. While our Rugged Adventure rules and Howard Whitehouse's excellent Amazing Adventures are rules intended for miniature gaming on a table top, this type of gaming bears little resemblance to your typical Napoleonic campaign.

The following short article is a run down on how Kurt Hummitzsch and I approach our very popular Rugged Adventure convention demo games. The overall approach is inspired by pulp fiction, but the specific approach is movie serial.

For those unfamiliar, movie serials were cheap action films aimed at kids and cut into roughly 20 minute segments, each ending in a deadly cliffhanger predicament for the hero. The segments were shown once a week at local movie houses in hope that the kids would return weekly to find out what happens next. Often the serial's hero was an athlete who regularly showed off his diving ability or whatever talent got him the job though it usually wasn't his acting skill. Good examples, if you can track them down, are: Commando Cody and the Radar Men from the Moon, Robinson Crusoe of Clipper Island, Gene Autry and the Phantom Empire.

A good point to start would be: [www.serialsquadron.com](http://www.serialsquadron.com), but I can often find inexpensive serial DVDs in my local department store's bargain bin. The innocent fun offered by old serials is an acquired taste in these times of mind-numbing special effects but, like pulp literature, they were often brimming with manic inspiration and make great fodder for fun-filled miniature games.

That said we look at our table-top as a film set. Constructing the terrain then becomes a matter of the film budget. The story, as was often the case with serials, is written around what sets we have available. If you happen to have a lot of 25mm Roman buildings left over from your War Hammer Ancient Battles campaign, then presto, do a lost civilization game. Most Darkest Africa aficionados have sufficient jungle scenery. The same approach holds true for figures. Your Greek hoplites might not enjoy being mowed down by bold explorer Rex Reegen's machinegun, but like any good extra, they'll collect their check at the end of the day. Bottom-line, use what you have to get started. As a figure maker I'd like you to buy my minis but to be honest, if you have a small collection of miniatures from the Victorian period to 1950 to represent your primary characters, you probably already have enough figs to get going. Cowboys work (as anyone who has witnessed serial hero Roy Rogers shooting it out with gangsters can attest) as do soldiers from both wars, or any number of figs designed for popular role playing games. Be Spielberg eventually but get gaming first.

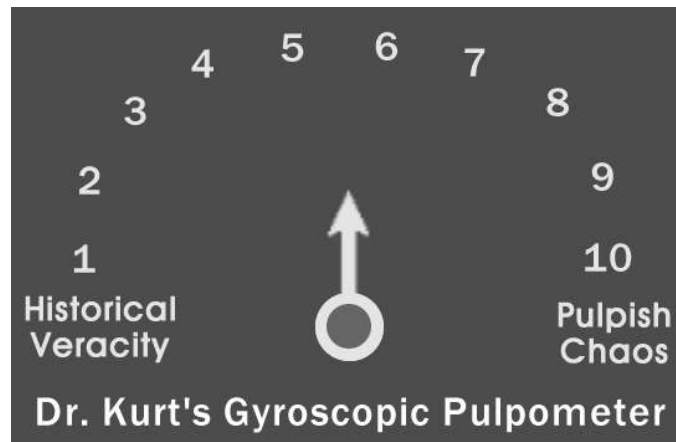
Once we have our set, then we get cooking on the scenario. This is where you get to play fast and loose with the historical facts. The year might be somewhere between the wars but it doesn't need to be more specific. Our fictional setting of China Station is a mythical SE Asian trade port disavowed by most major powers and plagued by a local, emotionally unstable warlord. Its 1920's-30's period but, as has been said, 'Never let the facts get in the way of a good story'.

For motif consistency we've come up with Dr. Kurt's Gyroscopic Pulpometer. It's a semi-circular gauge with a dial and arrow. On the left is **Historical Veracity**; on the right is **Pulp Chaos**. The gauge will set the mood of the game scenario.

A setting of **1** would indicate something like your typical historical engagement, government regulars beating up on rebel insurgents or the like. Yawwwn.

A setting of **10** would indicate that all bets are off. There could be tentacled monsters, death rays, killer robots and Nazi she-wolves all fighting Sgt. Preston of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and his girlfriend, the beautiful Zolanda of the Underwater Empire. Zoweee!

Sam Spade verses Al Capone would land somewhere in the **3** zone. Capone was real, Sam wasn't but neither will have a ray-gun. A **6** might indicate an exciting Doc Savage type adventure full of gizmo inventions and one or two wonky circumstances but no actual vampires. The zone between **5** and **6** should be where real science and physics end. Feel free to crank it past 10 though, it won't break. Capone might have appreciated having an army of zombie bootleggers aboard his own private amphibious submarine.



Here is a synopsis of one of our scenarios. Kurt had to be wrapped in a warm blanket and given a quiet week in the rest home after cooking this one up but it was plenty fun to play. It ranks at about 7 on the Pulpometer.

## Rocket Corp to the Rescue!

Somewhere south of China Station, the evil Dr. Katana is manufacturing a deadly poison gas in a secret jungle lab hidden beneath an extinct volcano. He has made arrangements to ship the gas to his state-side client by way of a band of grubby smugglers led by the unpleasant Mr. M (played by Peter Lorre) who have a truck for transporting the gas canisters through the jungle and a float plane they must then load and fly away. A renegade Japanese general has supplied Katanna with a bodyguard of elite marines to protect his operation. Katanna has also infested the local streams with his special cross-bred flying fish piranhas which will make things interesting for any unwary trespassers.

Meanwhile; a squad of the top-secret United States Rocket Corp, a special unit of flying soldiers equipped with rocket packs, has been dispatched to intercept and destroy Katanna's shipment, based on information obtained by government agents operating in the east.

Added to this mix are Doc Thompson and his band of eccentric adventurers who have been asked by the daughter of a missing scientist to help find her father. Doc and the boys have tracked the kidnapped scientist to the same jungle local, little knowing that Dr. Katanna is behind the kidnapping as well and is holding the girl's father prisoner in his poison gas factory lair. Doc must contend with a local warlord before he can make his way to Katanna and save the scientist. The warlord is employed by the Japanese to keep strangers away.

Got all that? Six players, Katanna, Mr. M, Japanese General, Rocket Corp, Doc T and the Local Warlord. All have slightly different goals and each a cadre of followers, 'extras', to do the general fighting and tromping about same table. Poison Gas is there for excitement and otherwise it is up to the gamers to add the colour and action. Every time we run a scenario it turns out differently and, as Kurt has said many times, it is as much fun to run a Pulp game as it is to play in it. Remember to stress the importance of the story as opposed to concentrating on victory conditions.

In Rugged Adventures we assign each player their own character which we call a PRP (player represented personality). Players should get into their character roles, including the villains who often have more fun than the heroes. It is character interaction that drives the game. The extras will shoot and charge and perish gloriously but the players get to glare menacingly at each other, issue hollow threats, snarl, shout and laugh in the face of death.

Keep your games light hearted. Invent silly schemes and irrational vendettas to motivate the bad guys to do what the nutty things they do and assign hokey, fun tasks to the heroes. Rescuing the damsel in distress is always good. Leaping from a perilous cliff into crocodile infested waters is even better.

Characters should also be hard to kill. Think about how many times Indiana Jones evaded the venomous fangs of certain death. We often allow the players to concoct implausible survival strategies which, if they fit nicely into a pulp cliché, will earn the player a luck roll or perhaps will be granted outright depending on how well it drives the game story. This also applies to the villains, remembering that great villains like Fu-Manchu always survived their defeat to return in the next installment.

The game master should remind the players stay in character. Mighty hero Doc Thompson will never deliberately take a life. This often means he has to give up the direct path to victory in order to save his friends. If that means letting the villain escape, then that is what Doc would do. Again, winning is not the goal; a fun story is.

One flashy dash we add to our demo games is the requirement that all the players wear appropriate hats (or ripped shirt as in Doc T's case). These we supply from our own trunk at the shows but I highly recommend you adopt this practice. It serves two purposes. The first is identification. The guy in the sailor hat will of course be quickly related to his miniature counterpart on the table-top and he will also feel more inclined to talk like a sailor when interacting with the other players. The second purpose is the unconscious elimination of the notion of a 'serious' game. A player will be less inclined towards rules lawyering if they have a large Chinese peasant hat perched on their head.

Concluding a serial-style Pulp game is easy. You don't even need to finish it. Our technique with *Rugged Adventures* is the wrap-story. At the point that the game is called all players, surviving or not, are called to present their version of what happened. Wrap stories need not be 100% accurate descriptions of the proceedings. Think about those TV shows where all the characters remember the same incident in different ways. That's what we want here and the best story (usually the one that gets the most laughs) wins.

As for rules, I would be remiss if I didn't plug **Rugged Adventures** by Kurt Hummitzsch and myself which is still in development but is partially available, free, on the Pulp Figures web site, [www.pulpfigures.com](http://www.pulpfigures.com). You can also obtain Howard Whitehouse's excellent *Astounding Tales!*, released by "**And That's The Way It Was**". We have traded inspiration with Howard many times over seething mounds of boiled caribou while holed up in a trapper's cabin during one of our frequent Canadian blizzards. Other swell sets are also out there or on their way but this article is not about rule mechanics. Instead, I've tried to endorse a fun approach to this bigger-than-life genre that for some is very old and familiar and for others will be almost new.

And a final note; the beautiful part about this genre is that the fiction, film and radio are still out there to be discovered and enjoyed. In the last few years I've had the immense pleasure to acquaint myself with numerous heroes of yore which have been the inspiration for the miniatures I've sculpted and will be sculpting for years to come. I still

play historical wargames frequently, but for sheer childish fun with miniatures, Pulp gaming is a hoot. You won't be disappointed and pass the nitro Kurt.

Special Thanks to Jeffrey Scott Jones for the use of his character Dr. Katanna and the wonderful flying fish/piranhas.