

A Song of Frost and Shadow: Fantasy Skirmish Wargames

By Paul Le Long

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Introduction

I recently posted a review on the blog of Frostgrave, Rangers of Shadow Deep and Frostgrave: Perilous Dark. As I said in that review, I really like these games, their settings and their style. They are also great inspiration for solo play and a style of play that is focused on linked games and campaigns with a light roleplaying element, all of which I enjoy. I don't however, like the combat rules so much and so I wondered whether I could do some modifications.

A little while ago I converted my own Shields and Skulls fantasy skirmish rules (themselves adapted from the old Heroquest game) to incorporate Song of Blades and Heroes. Again I wasn't sold on the combat system in SB&H but I loved the activation system and so I just spliced the two together so that I had a game with the activation and turn sequence of SB&H and the combat mechanisms of S&S. Essentially what I've done in this article is take that hybrid and stitch it to Rangers/Frostgrave to make the ultimate Frankenstein game!

So, these rules are for RPG-light skirmish wargames similar to Frostgrave and Rangers of Shadow Deep but using Song of Shields and Skulls (SSS) as the basic engine. The rules include character development, henchmen for troupe play, skills, abilities, and magic. The emphasis is on scenarios with proper objectives and narrative, often forming a short campaign – if you just want a simple skirmish wargame it's probably easier to just play SSS straight and not bother with the character development bits.

The Rules

The Turn

Dice to see which side goes first or decide who is the attacker and they go first. You can try to activate each figure in your force in turn. When both sides have activated all their figures, then the turn is over and we start again.

Activation

This is based on Song of Blades and Heroes. Each figure can choose to roll 1-3 dice to activate. For each success (result is higher than the model's Quality) he gets one action. Two or three fails = no actions at all and play passes to the other side.

Group Activation is possible provided all models in the group are adjacent to each other. Groups are activated by a Leader giving them an order (which is one of his activations) then the group activates as usual (as if they were a normal single figure).

This does take some getting used to. If a figure has relatively poor quality - for example only activates on 5+ on a d6 then you are taking quite a chance if you try to do more than one thing in a turn because they will probably fail - rolling 3d6 and trying to get at least two 5s is hard - and that will be the end of your turn. You could try to activate that guy last, so it doesn't matter or just try one die for one action - if it fails at least you don't lose your whole turn. So quality matters and you have to make decisions right from the start. There's a lot of friction which is good for solo play.

Movement and Combat

- Move is 4 inches per action (double it for mounted figures)
- You are allowed to disengage from combat but if you do your opponent gets a free whack at you
- For combat we use Heroquest dice (you can adapt normal d6s) which have 3 Skulls and 3 Shields.
- Combat is an action – a figure rolls a number of dice based on ability when attacking or defending. When attacking, skulls are hits; shields are misses. The defending figure rolls dice to defend – Skulls are wasted, Shields deflect hits. If someone hits you with 2 Skulls, you need to roll 2 Shields in defence to deflect the blow
- Missile combat works the same way; for range I'd say just see what looks right on your table - thrown weapons are going to be very close range only but bows and crossbows are going to be able to hit pretty much the entire table at this scale – just adopt whatever looks right to you.
- Only attacking figures inflict damage, defenders just defend – though on their go they can obviously turn the tables. You can only kill someone on your own go
- If you use two activations to attack in melee or with a missile (this represents striking a mighty blow or taking time to aim respectively) you get +1 attack die
- Most figures have only a single wound – once hit they are down & removed from play.
 - Characters start with 1 but can have up to 6 wounds
 - Major NPCs will have 2 or 3 wounds depending on the scenario
 - Large monsters like Ogres and Trolls will have 2-3 wounds
 - Something huge like a dragon might have 6 wounds
 - Anyone that does have more than 1 wound: you cause/take 1 wound for every skull more than shields – so you roll 4 skulls and the enemy rolls 2 – you inflict 2 wounds
- Armour: assume that each figure is armoured in an appropriate fashion for its type and that this is reflected in its defence score. If a figure is deemed especially well or poorly armoured, apply modifiers as you see fit
- Cavalry: +1 attack die against foot
- Cover: -1 or -2 to missile attacks depending on the type of cover - use your discretion
- When fighting more than one foe: subtract one dice for attack & defend for every extra foe (so a Sergeant (4 dice) fighting three foes would roll only 2 dice)
- Fumbles: When you roll all shields on an attack roll or double 1 on an activation, the figure in question has fumbled (possibly fallen over, slipped, dropped a weapon) and miss your next turn
- On the following table, the numbers refer to the number of dice a figure rolls in attack or defence

Monster & Recruitment Table

Figure	Attack (# dice)	Defend (# dice)	Quality	Morale	Cost/XP
Normal Man	1	1	5+	1	4
Militia	2	2	4+	2	8
Man at Arms	3	3	3+	3	12
Sergeant	4	4	3+	4	15
Knight	5	5	3+	5	18
Hero	6	6	3+	6	21
Wizard	2	2	3+	6	13
Goblin	2	2	5+	2	7
Orc	3	3	4+	3	11
Skaven	2	2	4+	2	8
Zombie	1	4	3+	Never test morale	14
Skeleton	2	4	3+	Never test morale	15
Gnoll	4	4	4+	3	13
Ogre	6	6	5+	3	16
Troll	5	5	5+	3	14
Chaos Warrior	5	5	4+	5	17
Beastman	5	3	5+	3	12
Elf	4	4	3+	4	15
Dwarf	4	5	4+	5	16

Morale

Roll when:

- A force is down by one third (everyone rolls)
- A Leader is killed (everyone rolls)
- When someone of higher rank is killed (adjacent figures)
- When the number of figures down (including routed) is greater than the number of figures left (everyone rolls)

How to Test:

Each figure rolls the number of dice shown in the table above. If there are more skulls than shields, the figure runs away (remove from the game). For every skull the figure retreats one move.

Character Generation, Experience and Henchmen

You build a character or possibly two and then hire henchmen to accompany you on missions. For most missions you can take 100 points worth of characters + henchmen. Each character costs 25 recruitment points.

Build Points for Characters

- Each character start with the stats for a Man-at-Arms (see the Recruitment Table above)
- Each character gets 10 Build Points (BPs)
 - You may spend up to 3 BPs to increase stats (Attack, Defence, Quality, Morale) – so to raise your attack by one dice costs 1 BP
 - You may spend up to 2 points to increase the number of wounds you have – you start with just one like everyone else but you can purchase another 2 if you want at this stage and more later
 - You may spend up to 5 BPs to purchase special abilities – 1 point per special ability
 - You may spend any number of BPs to hire more henchmen at a rate of 1BP for an extra 10 recruitment points
 - You may spend any number of BPs to increase skills – each character has a number of skills all at +0; if you purchase a skill you have +1 in that skill; if you purchase the same skill again you have +2 and so on. So you might buy lots of skills all at +1 or maybe concentrate on just a couple and have them at +2 or more. Using skills will be explained in a minute

Special Abilities

- These tend to give a boost either to skills, combat rolls and so on
- Special Abilities may be bought during character generation and are usually only available to characters, not henchmen or monsters

Special Ability	Bonus Conferred	When Can It Be Used?	Comments
Blend in to the Shadows	+5 to Stealth; Avoid combat – the enemy targets someone else instead	Once per scenario	
Dash	Double movement	Once per scenario	
Deadly Shot	If a missile attack hits convert all dice results into Skulls	Once per scenario	For an extra deadly attack
Deadly Strike	If a melee attack hits convert all dice results into Skulls	Once per scenario	For an extra deadly attack

Distraction	Move an enemy in any direction you want	Once per scenario	But not off a cliff or something harmful
Dive for Cover	Automatically evade a missile attack	Once per scenario	Transfixed afterwards
Evade	Disengage from combat	Once per scenario	Enemy doesn't get a free attack
Focus	+8 to any Skill roll	Once per scenario	
Frenzied Attack	Double your attack dice in the next attack	Any time	Miss your next go and no defence dice if attacked in the meantime
Turn Undead	Make an undead target miss it's next go	Any time – target must be within 6'	Any number of undead can be targeted so long as they are within 6' and next to each other; target rolls 1 die, on a skull it misses a go
Destroy Undead	Ranged attack through prayer	Any time	Single target within 6' – missile attack rules apply - you get 6 attack dice for this attack
Hand of Fate	Re-roll any dice	Once per scenario	
Willpower	Automatically pass one morale check	Once per scenario	
Parry	Automatically succeed when defending	Once per scenario	
Powerful Blow	Add three Skulls to an attack roll	Once per scenario	
Roll With the Punch	Take only one damage from a successful attack	Once per scenario	
Steady Aim	Add 4 attack dice to your roll when shooting	Once per scenario	
Spellcaster	You can cast spells	Any time	

Skills

- You have a list of skills, each is +0 unless you have improved that skill (see Build Points above). When called on to use a skill you roll 1d20 and have to beat a target number to succeed.
 - For example your character has to jump across a chasm – an athletics skill test is called for with a target number of 12. Let's say the character has +1 Athletics; he rolls 1d20 and the result is 11. But you add your +1 which takes the roll to 12 which is the target so you succeed

- All figures in the game have the same skills but most henchmen will be +0 in everything – though some specialists will have the odd skill here & there
- You will have to decide target numbers yourself when designing scenarios or when things come up in play. As a rule of thumb anything under 10 is fairly easy, 10-12 is about average, anything over about 14 is very tough

Skill	What Does it Do?
Acrobatics	Jumping, climbing, swinging from chandeliers...
Ancient Lore	History, religion, arcane stuff
Armoury	Knowledge of weapons & armour; the ability to improvise
Leadership	Can issue orders to henchmen, group activations
Navigation	Not getting lost
Perception	Spot hidden objects or people, listening
Read Runes	Ancient languages and arcane language
Stealth	Hide in shadows, camouflage
Strength	Kick down doors, lift heavy objects
Survival	Surviving in harsh environments
Swim	Swimming, avoid drowning when you fall in the water
Track	Tracking, following clues
Traps	Spot traps as well as set them. Can avoid a trap that activates as an event

Building a Troupe

- Putting together a party to go on missions is done by simply choosing party members from the Monster/Recruitment Table. You have 100 points to spend
 - Each Character costs 25 points (regardless that they start off at Man-at-Arms level which is usually only 12 points – they have lots of skills and abilities plus the opportunity for advancement which makes them more valuable)
 - Each henchman costs whatever the Monster table says – so 12 points for a Man-at-Arms, 15 for a Sergeant and so on
- Example: you chose to have two characters (50 points), two Men-at-Arms (24 points), one Sergeant (15 points) and one Militia man (8 points) for a total of 97 points. The remaining three points are wasted but that's a pretty tough troupe
- You could do it differently and have one character (25 points) with 9 Militia (72 points) for a total of 97 points – less quality in this troupe but sometimes quantity has a quality all of its own!

Experience

- You gain Experience Points (XP) by killing baddies, collecting treasure, completing scenarios and reaching objectives.
- The number of XP you get for killing monsters is listed in the Monster Table

- XP gained for finishing a scenario (successfully) is 100
- XP gained for reaching an objective is dependent on the scenario but a typical objective might be something like 'steal the gemstone eyes of the demonic statue' for which you might award 50-100XP
- Treasure: Some treasure will come in the form of magic items or equipment that you might want to keep and use – there's no XP for this, the item is its own reward. Gold, jewels, money is different – for each gold piece (or whatever your currency is) you get 1XP – so if you find a chest with 100 gold pieces and manage to carry it out of the dungeon, you can convert that cash into XP, in this case 100XP
- For every 500XP you earn, you go up one level
- Henchmen don't earn XP, only characters – but you can use some of your XP in order to either buy better henchmen or promote existing one
- Going up a level. Each time you level up you can do one of the following:
 - Increase either your Attack or Defence dice by 1 (to a maximum of 6)
 - Improve your Quality by 1 (to a maximum of 3+)
 - Improve your Morale by 1 (to a maximum of 6)
 - Increase one of your Skills by 1
 - Purchase another wound (to a maximum of 6)
 - Purchase a new Special Ability
 - Promote one of your henchmen – from say, a Man-at-Arms to a Sergeant (cost in XP = that set out in the Monster Table)
 - Buy new henchmen (cost in XP = that set out in the Monster Table)

Death and Injury

- If a henchman is killed in a scenario, they are just dead and nothing else but that. These people are expendable – buy a new one
- If a character is reduced to zero wounds in a scenario they are not necessarily dead – we won't know until we flip the body over. Roll a die: on a skull the character is dead – sorry about that, roll up a new one. On a shield the character is alive but badly wounded – reduce one of their stats (Attack, Defence, Morale, Quality) by 1 or reduce a skill by 4, or erase a special ability

Magic

Magic is a big topic and I'm going to skip over it a bit here otherwise it might take up a dozen pages if I go down the rabbit hole of providing spell lists. I simply use the Frostgrave system with the spells they provide. Essentially you choose a spell to cast, it has a target number just like a skill roll and you beat that number in order to cast the spell. A rule of thumb is the more powerful a spell, the higher the target number will be to cast it. If creating your own spell list or borrowing from something like Dungeons & Dragons I would have easy stuff like Read Magic at a target number of 8, things like Fireball at something like 12, and something really grandiose like, I don't know, a meteor shower, at 16+.

Playing the Game

I'll just go through a few tips on putting it all together, much of which I've picked up from Perilous Dark. First, you're going to need a scenario - here's one I made earlier.



The Whole Table

In this scenario the objective is to cross the bridge and exit from the opposite table edge. Standing in our way is a bunch of orcs guarding the bridge and some goblins on rooftops armed with bows (the models haven't actually got bows but that's only because I don't have any actual Goblin archers painted yet). Simple enough so far. But now we add in some solitaire stuff to make the game more exciting.



Party and Orcs at the Bridge

First, we set a time limit - in this case 16 turns. You don't get the experience points for completing the scenario if you don't do it in the time. Time limits are important because it forces you to push on and not just stand back and pick off the enemy from a safe distance (boring). You could introduce a steady stream of reinforcements or deteriorating environmental hazards instead of a simple time limit - you know, the temple is collapsing because it was inexplicably built on top of a volcano, and you have to get in and seize The Blue Jewel before the whole place comes down on top of you.

Next, we have events. In my game I had random events on turns 4, 8, 12 & 16. Again I followed the Perilous Dark advice and prepare some playing cards - I have 6 cards for 4 events in this case, so that although I know what I wrote on the cards I can't be sure which ones will come up. Here I have 2 cards with a crumbling building (since my table represents ruins) which will shower a random hero with falling rubble forcing an acrobatics roll to dive out of the way (incidentally this is a good way to do traps in a solo game - otherwise you would know where they are but this way they happen at random and force you to either dive out of the way or spot them in advance with a Traps skill check). Anyway, the other events are 2 cards that announce that reinforcements arrive.



1 Goblins runs away, 1 Goblin runs away to warn the rest of the tribe (you have to stop him before he leaves the table, or it will have consequences in your next scenario - you have to decide what those consequences are when designing the next scenario).

See the little green markers on the table with the Q on them? Those are Clue Tokens. There are six of them and if one of your party recovers the token they get a clue - 3 of them are just random bits of treasure or equipment, 1 is a minor unspecified clue that has no bearing on the game except to give you 10 XP. Two of the clues however will reveal to your party a secret entrance to the next level/scenario which I'm assuming here is an old Dwarven mine inhabited by Goblins. Finding this clue will give you some advantage in the next scenario when we come to write it.

So that's our scenario. Basic idea + opposition + objective + time limit + events + clues. We also need a party of adventurers. My party consisted of two characters, three Men-at-Arms (one of whom is a crossbowman) and a Sergeant.



Here are the characters. The archer character (whose name for various silly reasons is Pantoufle) has some extra dice for attack & defence, two extra wounds and is good at shooty things and stealthy things. The lady with the axe (named Pamplemousse for even sillier reasons) is much more fighty in a direct bury her axe in your head sort of way so she has skills and abilities that make her tough. Both characters have Leadership so

that they can order the cannon fodder - sorry, soldiers - around. The party actually costs 101 points not 100 but we're not going to worry about that.

During play I do control the monsters with a simple AI although I often forget and just do the obvious thing for them in terms of actions. In any case it's usually clear what they should do. Generally, if they can see an enemy they will either shoot at it or advance to fight it. If they can't see an enemy they will move to a pre-determined point on the table (usually in the middle) and in this case the bridge. If you don't want a central point you can have them just do nothing or move in a random direction. Mostly they will soon set eyes on an enemy of some sort and start moving towards the action. If in doubt let yourself be guided by the scenario - for example if a monster is on guard duty they probably won't be wandering around much unless they have a patrol route in which case they will just follow their route until they see something and once they see it they will head there to try and kill whatever it was they saw.

Conclusion

I hope that gives you some inspiration. I also hope it illustrates how good Frostgrave and Rangers of Shadow Deep are since they are the main sources. Rangers is designed for solo play and is well worth £20 of anyone's money. Frostgrave itself is more traditional but still full of great ideas and worth buying even though it is a two-player game. Frostgrave Perilous Dark is where it's all converted to solo play, very much along the lines of Rangers. Perilous Dark is full of great advice for scenario design which I found valuable as well as inspirational. In truth the rules you use for combat don't really matter, just use whatever you like; it's the scenario design that's important. You could even play a straight up game of D&D using these scenarios.