

# NORTHERN CROWN

## NEW WORLD ADVENTURES

### DESIGNER'S NOTES

Northern Crown was my attempt to create a mythic past for North America. I love the physical artifact of the American landscape — its mountains, forests, lakes, and historic sites — and I often found myself imagining it as a place where fantasy adventures could happen. I wanted to accommodate both history and legend, stirring them together into a setting that would have the feel of the historical past but would allow for heroic adventures, magic, and monsters. The geography would look the same, but the place names would be subtly altered, suggesting an alternate history where the might-have-beens and what-ifs of our past were made real.

My wife Alison and I did most of the groundwork for Northern Crown during some marathon road trips about ten years ago. We would drive through Vermont or upstate New York, and talk about what sort of characters would exist in our fantasy version of America's past. We built the game around our character concepts, which seems like an odd way to do things, but is quite effective really, because you are guaranteed to end up with a campaign setting that produces and justifies the sorts of characters you want to play.

Alison's first character was Catspaw, a woman born to a proper Puritan family in Boston but taken captive by Penacooks. She had a ranger/druid feel — we decided that the native religious leader Aspinquid had taken her as a disciple. My foil to Catspaw was John Champion, a Falstaff-like soldier who had been in the service of the Salem witches for many years in return for

some mysterious service they had rendered to him regarding his shady past. He's still one of my favorite characters to play: irascible, weak-willed, but fiercely loyal to his friends. Champion's charge was a young witch named Anne Blackwood, who eventually rose to become a coven mother in her own right. The love of her life was the natural philosopher and dashing young noble William Carlyle, who was torn between his duty to the Carolingian king and his philosophical sympathies for his mentor Philathelias Jefferson's Republic of Sophia. Blackwood and Carlyle were a first inkling of the tension between magic and science that would become a central theme of the game.

Those first adventures were memorable — Chiron Franklyn helped the PCs escape from a besieged town in a hot air balloon; they rescued a Mohawk leader from the dungeons of the Chateau Frontenac in Québec, and beat a French pirate captain to the discovery of the Northwest Passage. Eventually they circled the globe, rescuing Sir Francis Drake *en route*, returned him to Gloriana's court, and sailed triumphantly back to Sophia as national heroes. Then we left the New World for a time and played a campaign that took place exclusively in Uropa, which had been begging to be fleshed out for some time. Ottomans, Knights of Malta, and witches living in the Pripyat Marshes were all involved somehow. But we always returned to Northern Crown, where there are now three generations of PCs waiting patiently for us to carry on their stories.



So the design process was character-centered, and the world expanded as the PCs traveled further afield in search of adventure. My original hand-drawn map showed only the northeastern corner of the continent, as far down the coast as Virginia. Many of the place names came from my father-in-law's map collection. One of the books he recommended to me — *A New World* by Arthur Quinn — really set the tone for the political scene in Northern Crown, with vividly written portraits of key figures like Samuel de Champlain and Pieter Stuyvesant.

What guides me when I'm working on Northern Crown is a feeling — an atmosphere — that I'm trying to sustain. When I consider adding a new element — a monster, an invention, or whatever — I have to decide whether it's in the spirit of the game. Keeping the feel of an alternate-history world consistent is a tricky thing, because every event or character you add has a ripple effect on what you've already established, and you're always on the lookout for those continuity errors that are hard to root out on a project that you've been working on intermittently for 10 years.

Other decisions are easier to make. I rejected one publisher's offer to publish Northern Crown because they wanted to put orcs in the Great Smoky Mountains and have tribes of trolls lurking about, which I thought demonstrated a remarkably deaf ear for continuity and feel. I never had those problems with Michelle Nephew as my editor, thank goodness. She and Atlas Games' president, John Nephew, seemed to understand quite well what I was trying to do and basically let me do it, which I think has allowed me to write a book (two actually) that is much truer to the vision of a single author than you are likely to find in most RPGs these days.

Aside from the struggle to maintain continuity and atmosphere, the biggest challenge in writing Northern Crown was figuring out a way to communicate the "core story" of the game to new readers. When I write for publication, I'm always worried about barriers to entry — things that will

make that potential buyer put the book back on the shelf and walk away. I didn't want their reaction to be, "Well, it sounds like a cool setting, but I have no idea how I would run an adventure for it." Michelle and I referred to this challenge as the "What goes on around here?" question. When you play a standard fantasy game, you might have some idea that it's going to be about going into a dungeon, killing monsters, and grabbing their treasure. Northern Crown can be about that, too, but usually isn't. After I turned in the first draft of the manuscript, we felt that I hadn't really given readers a sense of the kind of stories that happen in the game world. We eventually added the narrative sections that introduce each chapter of New World Adventures as a way of weaving a representative adventure into the book.

Illustrations can communicate the core story, too. We were fortunate to find Aaron Campbell on short notice to create the wonderful covers for the books. Like John and Michelle, he seemed to have an intuitive feel for my work, and the result is really breathtaking. As for the interior illustrations — well, the cultures, core classes, and prestige classes alone added up to 33 watercolor paintings. Then there were the armor and weapons, the maps, and the monsters. I developed a technique specifically for this project, which involved sketching in pencil, going over it with colored pencil, shading with a monochrome watercolor wash, and then returning to colored pencil to tighten it all up.

My only regret is that once a book is in print it's out of your hands, and there's no more tinkering with it. This is a good thing, perhaps, or else you would never move on to new challenges. You have to let it go, trust that you've done your best work, and give your readers a chance to pick up the story. I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity to share my game world, and I hope you enjoy the results.

Doug Anderson  
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