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A SagaBorn Roleplaying Game Compatible Product

by Michael Bielaczyc

I am going to be discussing my design of the Road West Living Campaign over the next few issues of the Saga. It is based on the design philosophy of the West Marches Campaign by Ben Robbins.

I am sure most of you have heard about this style of play, so I won't go in deep to explain it. There are tons of articles, YouTube videos (I like Matt Colville's video), and books about West Marches. I will mainly explain how I am running mine.

A very brief overview is that a West Marches Campaign is for a larger than normal pool of players, an area of unexplored land, and a gameplay session that always ends up back at the base town. The player group doesn't always have it be the same, as they always start from the town and end at the town.

So my first foray into this was a few years back, and we played less with a West Marches unknown map, but rather just a "here are some jobs available, and you have to end up back home when we quit playing."

This time, I want to beta test the new SagaBorn d100 rules, so I thought an exploration, an unknown and dangerous exploration, would be a great way to test. Instead of having pressure to have encounters balanced, and stories prepped, I could have people play in this sandbox, and I could see how things pan out. And if characters die along the way, then the player would just make a

new one, hopefully helping me make sure character creation is working right.

As for the differences between this and a normal West Marches campaign, The Road West has a goal beyond exploring the unknown. The campaign starts at the bottom right corner of a large hex map. The Wanderers (the adventurers guild) needs a road going up to the upper left of the map. The issue is that the lands in between are dangerous, uncharted, and wild.

The hex needs to be surveyed to determine if a road can pass through it. The adventurers (called Westbounders) do the surveying. After six successful surveys the hex is deemed "safe." As long as there are no natural features that would make as road impassible, the road crew begins work. Once a road is built, the hex no longer presents a danger, so the Westbounders can "fast travel" down roads to get deeper in the map more quickly on a game night.

The last mechanic I built was that the roads need a stronghold every 16 miles (2 smaller hexes) for the guard patrols to keep the road safe. The Westbounders will build these strongholds, either as a group or as single characters controlling and managing them.

I am using Fantasy Grounds to keep up with the campaign and also with shops. There is a neat extension that allows shops to be set up, so the home base of Elmhearth has its own shop, but so could the player-controlled strongholds.

But before we got started playing, I needed to figure out how to make the hex map and random tables work.

Where to Start?

So, when I started designing a West Marches Campaign to test out the new SagaBorn D100 System, I immediately got overwhelmed.

I know the idea is to make things randomly generated so it is easier on the gamemaster, but it just flustered me. If I were using another system, or not having it take place in my world, it would have been easier. But I always come back to the Dark Return, which meant all the work was on my shoulders. Another thing that was an issue is that I knew what I wanted the campaign to do, make a road through the mountains. Which also led to the fact that the space was huge. How could I divide that up? Have 1000 hexes? A bigger and smaller hex system? What about travel time between or through these hexes? The space was already defined. Ever since I made a world map with a grid, I have tried to make all the smaller localized maps line up. (I know, I create my own problems.)

So, I launched into watching videos about found a bunch of good information, but, and maybe it's just me and my search terms, I just couldn't find a video that showed me where to start. I ended up starting with the random tables, but that felt empty without a feel for the lands. I realized I was not addressing the map because I didn't want to do it "wrong." But guess what, I needed to start with the map.

I tried a few solutions to the hex issue, but finally landed on this: mega hexes divided. I thought about mini hexes within the megahex, but then there were empty spaces. So, a 1-1/2 ratio gave me my hexes divided in a pleasant way. I made each mega hex 4 days to cross, so the outer edge divisions take 1 day and the center hex takes 2 days. Once I had this done, everything started to fall into place.

After this, I came up with some factions and marked their base locations on the map. The further from the home base, the harder the creatures. I then came up with terrain regions. From there, I

made copies of my hex map and did transparent overlays for a Creature Region map, and a Terrain Region Map.



An example of the color coded regions.

So there it is, once I had the map figured out, everything else started to fall into place.

Next time, onto the random tables...

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FROM THE READERS



WEST MARCHES CAMPAIGNS

If you have played a West Marches campaign, what is your favorite part as a player?

Seeing the different story lines come together

- Gort

Player camaraderie amidst the dangers of exploration and survival - Clay

How random events interact with player pattern seeking to form a (semi)coherent narrative.

-Larry Pants

Playing with different people at different times.

- SM Hillman

The flexibility of sessions if properly planned.

- The TJ from The NJ

The better likelihood hood of playing when scheduled.

- Matthew Brewer

If you have Gamemastered a West Marches Campaign, what is the most important part of prepping for one?

Creating enough quest lines to support your player base and loosely connecting them with a goal
-Gort

Having enough hex material from the start so players have lots of options.

- Stu Horvath

I think not over prepping. Situation creation is not easy, and creating a theme that links the various locations in some way is important. But you can do too much prep. You can create too many locations, too many random encounters, and too many bad guys. Using modular encounters worked best for me.

- SM Hillman

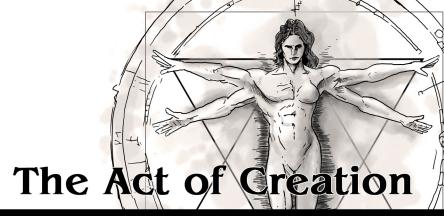
Making a story consistent regardless of who plays. Rolling with whomever shows up.

- The TJ from The NJ

The variety of parties and people you get to play with.

- Matthew Brewer





by Michael Bielaczyc

So I have been thinking about this a lot lately. I got in a funk the last week and couldn't shake it. By the way, when these things come up, I want to write about them in case my experience can help other people when they have these feelings.

Sometimes when making stuff, it can feel like I make something and then just toss it into the void. Just to be clear, I know how awesome my creative career has been. I have worked for some awesome people. I went to a great art college during a time before YouTube and smartphones took over. I met my heroes, studied under them, and learned a lot. My day job is adjacent to my dream job of being a full time fantasy artist and writer, and it allows me to often show my art in the places where I work. I have also had a long stable career that has allowed me many passion projects like SagaBorn. But there is always a want to have people see the stuff you make. Even when I know that is not the healthiest desire.

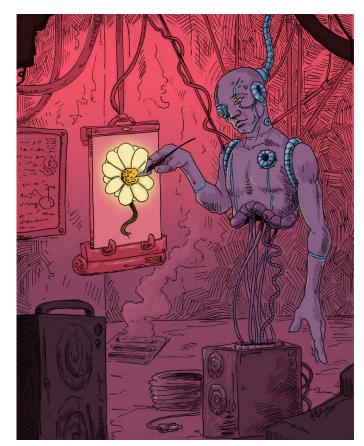
Growing up at the tail end of GenX, like others in that generation, I had no doubts that I would make art, paint covers for D&D, and become famous. That was sort of the Gen X motto in a way. We were all midnight philosophers who would find a way for our schemes to one day pan out, right?

That drive to create for others can lead down some dark paths. I think our culture also invades our belief system and forms this idea that money is the value of creative works. And if we can't

make money with it, then we at least need massive attention on the internet for our work, right? Those little thumbs up make the art worth something, right? What defines the worth of a creative piece?

When people ask you who you have done work for, they are never impressed by the answer "myself." Which is so sad. Shouldn't the act of creating be the most important? Not what brand has paid too little and wanted too much be the definition of our creative worth?

In this digital age, with corpos taking advantage of creators, it is more important than ever to make stuff and also to be in love with what you made. And no one else has to. All your creations have to do is make your spirit dance when you see what you have done. Don't let others define the importance of your work, the best art is the art that makes you feel fulfilled. And that's what we should all learn to strive for.



Appendix: i (magination)

Gormanghast

It's time for that discussion of imagination again, the Appendix i of our creativity, where Dane and Mike discuss what made them the creatives they are.

Mike:

Ok, so I know you love Gormenghast, and we have discussed it a few times, but today I really want to dig into it and why you tend to bring this book up at parties. I am not sure how familiar people are with this book/series, so can you give me a break down real quick?

Dane:

The Gormenghast series is one of the precursors to and inspirations for modern fantasy. The first book, Titus Groan, came out in 1946, between The Hobbit and The Fellowship of the Ring.

I think it's important to warn fantasy fans who haven't read it that it doesn't have many of the Tolkienesque tropes that we associate with fantasy. There are no elves, magic, skilled fighters, or anything of the sort.

In Titus Groan, you learn that for centuries, Castle Gormenghast and its surrounding earldom have lived amidst impenetrable lands that keep them secluded, to the point that there's little indication they're aware of an outside world at all. And no one outside seems to know about them. Supposedly, the castle was once populated, but over the centuries, the population has diminished, so most of the castle is empty and crumbling.

And yet, the inhabitants of the castle and the earldom continue their traditions. For everything they do, there's a ritual. The rituals are overseen by the Master of Rituals, who confers with his ancient tomes that have been maintained for countless generations to ensure every ritual is done precisely, despite no one remembering why they do these rituals.

Besides that, not much happens in Gormenghast. Their lives are steeped in ritual, and that leaves little concern for anything else.

Of course, the story is about a "villain" disrupting that way of life, and things begin to unravel. So when you start reading, it may seem like there's not much to it...just people going about their rituals. But when things start to change, it turns into a hell of a story.

Mike:

So, while Elric was written as a response to Conan, and Dune was inspired by Oregon dunes being affected by climate change and Herbert's views of human hubris. What do you think inspired Gormenghast?

Dane:

Speaking of Elric, Gormenghast was an enormous influence on Michael Moorcock. He even wrote a novel called Gloriana that tried to capture the atmosphere of Gormenghast and dedicated the book to Mervyn Peake.

I don't know if Gormenghast was in response to anything specific in the way Elric and Dune were. He was inspired by Poe and Shakespeare, gothic architecture, and time he spent in China as a child.

I honestly see Gormenghast as an effort to create something beautiful rather than an attempt to make a point. That doesn't mean it doesn't have powerful themes, but those themes are subtle. Fundamentally, it's a story of breaking from tradition to find freedom: Titus, from his birth, is destined to be the next Earl of

Groan, which, despite its privilege, means he'll be trapped in a life of constant ritual passed down through generations from which he can never stray. Along comes a villain who, despite his evil intent, disrupts the rituals in such a way that it opens doors to the freedom Titus seeks. It's a powerful story that may have been the blueprint for so much "law versus chaos" fiction that has come since.

Mike:

I would say fighting to get out of a system locked in a rigid belief and ritual is a pretty huge theme! I can see why this wasn't as popular as Lord of the Rings or Conan, but it makes me wonder what fantasy would be like these days if this book had been more popular. Maybe White Wolf's Vampire the Masquerade would have come out first instead of the combat-heavy D&D! So it sounds like character development would have to be the focus in the books?

Dane:

I would say yes, but I'd argue that the Gormenghast castle is the main character, somehow. The state of the castle alludes to some high age in the distant past that is slow disintegrating while the dwindling population mills about, repeating the same rituals their ancestors did through the same recurring cycles. The character of the castle and its inhabitants develops as its stationary existence is disrupted. In that process, the individual characters develop and evolve as they're shaped by the changing environment and circumstances.

And the characters can be bizarre. That's part of the fun: imagine a group of human beings sequestered long ago in a remote area that has been forgotten for centuries. Imagine that, from the outset, their lives were preordained and given meaning through rituals that never change, generation after generation. Now imagine that you find this place, bearing in mind that our world has developed, but theirs hasn't. To us, those people would be utterly bizarre, with different perceptions of the world and different ways of thinking. I think that's what Mervyn Peake was trying to imagine. These characters are weird. But I also found them endearing, even when

they were doing terrible things, and he brought them to life in a way that feels real.

What draws me to these books more than anything is the prose. Mervyn Peake is my favorite prose artist. I read the entire series slowly because I wanted to take in the language, even re-reading portions multiple times. The man can paint a picture and evoke feelings with words like nobody else.

Mike:

Sorry for continuing to compare this to Lord of the Rings, but they came out at the same time but are so different so that, in my head, it makes sense. Tolkien is also known for long passages and descriptions of places, but these days, many find his writing tedious. Do you think Mervyn Peake's holds up better?

Dane:

Mervyn Peake writes longer passages and more intricate descriptions than Tolkien. Tolkien may be considered tedious by some people, but he's also praised for being a master of the English language. I would argue he's surpassed by Peake, but that means that anyone calling Tolkien tedious would consider Gormenghast torture. That's probably why Peake didn't become as popular. It's a book for people who want to take their time and savor the prose. It's not slow—there's action, and the plot moves in ways that kept me glued to it—but there's no grand heroism, wars, magic, elves, swordplay, or much else that we typically associate with the Tolkien-inspired genre. It was always bound to be an influential but obscure series.

In music, I've always been fascinated by the musicians who stayed relatively obscure while their influence created or affected the things we all know. Mike Patton isn't a household name, but modern rock music wouldn't be remotely the same without him. It's possible entire genres wouldn't have developed. John Zorn, Townes Van Zandt, Diamanda Galás, Cardiacs, Kraftwerk, Neurosis, Melvins, Béla Bartók—all of these helped create genres

or inhabited genres all their own, and if any of them hadn't existed, the entire landscape of music as we know it might be different. That's Mervyn Peake's place in fantasy literature. He's not for everybody, but without him, the things we all know and love would be very different.

Mike:

So, since this work is so different from today's standard fantasy, what do you think modern fantasy (fiction, movies, games) could learn from the series?

Dane:

Prose. These days, there's a cultlike devotion to Hemingway-style prose with no adornment, and that's just among the people who think about prose at all. Many writers argue that prose isn't important and that only the story matters. Maybe that's true for some readers, but if the goal of writing is to paint a picture in the reader's mind and to immerse the reader in a strange world, then prose needs careful ornamentation. I wouldn't call any of Peake's prose purple, but it's poetic and evocative. The best prose artists I know have been influenced by Peake: Gene Wolfe, Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, Michael Moorcock, Terry Pratchett, Patrick Rothfuss, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Jeff VanderMeer, to name a few, are all great prose stylists, and all credit Peake with at least some part of their development, usually citing his prose, character development, and world-building.

And that's the other thing modern writers could learn from Peake: world-building. Gormenghast comes to life because it's so richly detailed and interesting. After reading this book, I felt like I'd been there, and now, years later, I can still imagine the gothic castle and its strange inhabitants. I have a poor memory, and I've forgotten quite a few details of the story, but I remember the world, and I remember how I felt exploring it.

Mike:

World building is something that is so elusive. In a time of multiverse and cinematic universes, I often feel that created spaces are missing a sense of place. I think we all should spend a little more like thinking about how a place may feel, how people live in that space, rather than just pumping out stories that entertain but are empty.

So any final thoughts on Gormenghast or Peake?

Dane:

I'd just recommend to anyone reading this: if you start reading Titus Groan, stick with it for a while. Modern stories tend to open with action to hook a reader, but Gormenghast rewards patience—and the reward is worth it. Also, don't rush it. It's worth it to take your time and experience the world. I promise, you'll get sucked in before you know it and won't be able to put it down until you've finished all three books.



Funtoral ages

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Troll

The common troll is a varied creature, ranging from 8 feet to 15 feet tall. The elves say the trolls were brought to these lands by the gods to fight in their wars. They do make tough adversaries. Their naturally fast being and

strength make them formidable in combat, and their aggression towards most creatures, including each other, makes them a terror to encounter. They also exhibit a strong appetite. A constant intake of food helps them regenerate wounds and build their powerful muscles.

They have no communities, languages, or cultures. They are solitary creatures, only coming together for mating, and often, only one survives that. The females tend to be larger and more muscular, as well as more territorial and aggressive.

The only sure way to kill a troll is to burn its head and spinal cord and spread its ashes into the sun.



SAGABORN D20

Troll

Challenge Rating: 5

Size: Large

Type: Humanoid (Giant)

Initiative: +2

Defense

Hit Points: 63 (6d8+36)

Armor Class: 16, touch 11, flat-footed 14 (-1 size, +2 Dex, +5

natural)

Saves: Fort +11 Ref +4 Will +3 Weaknesses: Sunlight, Fire, Acid, and Trollsbane

Offense

Speed: 30 ft. Base Attack: +4

Melee: 2 claws +9 melee (1d6+6) and bite +4 melee (1d6+3)

Ranged: Boulder +6 (1d6+6)

Special Attacks: Rend

Sanity Effects: -

Statistics

Abilities: STR 22 (+6), DEX 14 (+2), CON 22 (+6), INT 6 (-2), WIS

9 (-1), CHA 6 (-2)

Skills: Acrobatics +3, Athletics +6, Awareness 1, Endurance +6, Knowledge -2, Persuasion -2, Spellcraft -, Survival 1, Thievery +2 Talents: 3 points or recommended: Alertness, Grappler, Power

Attack Morale: 13

Special Qualities: DR 2/ fire or acid, Darkvision 90 ft., scent,

fast healing 2

Ecology

Environment: Any dark

Organization: Solitary or gang (2-6)

Treasure: Standard

Rend

If a troll hits with both claw attacks, it latches onto the opponent's body and tears the flesh. This attack automatically deals an additional 2d6+9 points of damage.

Regeneration

Fire and acid deal normal damage to a troll. If a troll loses a limb or body part, the lost portion regrows in 3d6 days. The creature can reattach the severed member instantly by holding it to the stump.

Sunlight

Sunlight turns a troll to stone. Its naturally tough skin absorbs the sunlight and rapidly produces calcium, causing it to irreversibly turn to "stone."

Weaknesses

Acid and Fire bypasses DR, and Sunlight turns fo troll to stone.

Trollsbane is an herb that does 2d6 subdual damage a troll when ingested or injured with it. Trollsbane grows on small islands in the swamp. It is a delicate herb, with a lavender smell. It does not affect any other creatures.



SAGABORN D100 PREVIEW

STR	CON	SIZ	INT	ACU	DEX
12	12	23	12	12	12

CV: 3

Class: Monster Type: Giant Speed: 30' HP: 25

Damage Modifier: 1d6

Armor Value: 4

Attack: (2) Claw 60% 1d6+1+1d6

Skills: Main Skills 60%, Other Skills 35%

Special: Rend, Darksight 60' **Weaknesses:** Fire, Acid, Sunlight

Horror: 3/2d6

Rend

If a troll hits with both claw attacks, it latches onto the opponent's body and tears the flesh. This attack automatically deals an additional 2d6 points of damage.

Regeneration

A troll regenerates at 1d6 HP per round on its turn. If a troll loses a limb or body part, the lost portion regrows in 3d6 days. The creature can reattach the severed member by holding it to the stump for 10 seconds. Fire and acid damage done to the troll does not regenerate.

Sunlight

Sunlight turns a troll to stone. Its naturally tough skin absorbs the sunlight and rapidly produces calcium, causing it to irreversibly turn to "stone." This process normally takes only a minute or two.

Weaknesses

Acid and Fire bypasses AV and regeneration, and Sunlight turns fo troll to stone.

Trollsbane is an herb that does 2d6 subdual damage a troll when ingested or injured with it. Trollsbane grows on small islands in the swamp. It is a delicate herb, with a lavender smell. It does not affect any other creatures in a negative way.

Troll Recipes

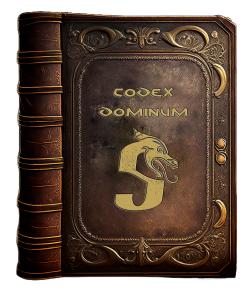
Troll blood can be brewed into a potion of regeneration (2 fast healing for 1 minute). Each troll has enough blood to make 5 potions.

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Kai Warrior

The kai warrior is one with his inner energy and the world around them. They can take this universal energy, called kai, to protect and defend themselves.

SAGABORN D100

Kai Mastery (2): You gain Kai equal to your current Power Points.

Kai Fist (1, prerequisite Kai Mastery): You imbue your energy into your martial arts. Your unarmed strikes gain lethal 1d6 damage and gain the Bleeding special.

Kai Protection (1, prerequisite Kai Mastery): You use 2 kai to form a protective force that flows over your skin. It gives you 1 AV, but you must not be impeded by any other armor. This effect lasts 8 hours.

Kai Speed (1, prerequisite Kai Fist): Once per round, you may spend 1 kai to attack another time.

Focused Strike (1, prerequisite Kai Speed): Your unarmed strikes can cause Impaling.

Pure Body (1, prerequisite Kai Protection): You may spend 1 kai to eliminate poison in your body. This takes a standard action.

Unsoiled Body (1, prerequisite Pure Body): You may spend 2 kai to cleanse yourself of any natural disease. This takes 1 hour of meditation.

Floating Step (1, prerequisite Kai Speed): As a free action, you may spend 1 kai to move double your normal speed for a round. Your feet do not touch the ground when you do this but must have solid or liquid matter beneath you.

Fluttering Jump (1, prerequisite Floating Step): You may spend 1 kai to triple your jump.

The Lethal Hand (1, prerequisite Focused Strike): You may spend 3 kai to add an additional 3d6 damage to an unarmed strike.

SAGABORN D20

Path: Kai Warrior

Hit Die: d10

Primary Ability Modifiers: Str, Dex

Lvl	Base Attack Bonus (BAB)	Class Bonus	Level Bonus*
1st	+1	Kai Mastery, Kai Fist, Second Wind	Starting HD (max), 1st Legacy item, 10 Skill points, 2 Expertise points, 2 Talent points
2nd	+2	Kai Protection,	+1 HD, +1 HP, +1 Skill point, +1 Expertise point, Legacy item gains power
3rd	+3	Kai Speed, Focused Strike	+1 HD, +1 Skill point, +1 Talent point, +1 Expertise point
4th	+4	Pure Body, Acrobatics +2	+1 HD, 2nd Legacy item, +1 Ability point, +1 Skill point, +1 Expertise point, Legacy items gain power
5th	+5	Extra Attack, Unsoiled Body	+1 HD, +1 Skill point, +1 Expertise point
6th	+6	Floating Step	+1 HD, +1 Skill point, +1 Talent point, +1 Expertise point, Legacy items gain power
7th	+7	Fluttering Step	+1 HD, +1 Skill point, 3rd Legacy item, +1 Expertise point
8th	+8	The Lethal Hand, Acrobatics +2	+1 HD, +1 Skill point, +1 Talent point, +1 Ability point, +1 Expertise point, Legacy items gain power

Level 1

Kai Mastery: You gain kai. Your starting kai is determined by your Kai Warrior level. You gain back all used kai after 8 hours of rest

Kai Pool Table 1: Base Kai per Day

Kai Warrior Level	Kai per Day
1st	2
2nd	4
3rd	7
4th	11
5th	16
6th	24
7th	33
8th	44

Kai Fist: You imbue your energy into your martial arts. Your unarmed strikes become lethal, doing 1d6 damage.

Level 2

Kai Protection: You use 2 kai to form a protective force that flows over your skin. It gives you 1 AV, but you must not be impeded by any other armor. This effect lasts 8 hours.



Level 3

Kai Speed: Once per round, you may spend 1 kai to attack another time.

Focused Strike: Your unarmed strikes cause Bleeding +1 for 1d4 rounds.

Level 4

Pure Body: You may spend 1 kai to eliminate poison in your body. This takes a standard action.

Level 5

Extra Attack: A kai warrior gains an additional attack each round.

Unsoiled Body: You may spend 2 kai to cleanse yourself of any disease. This takes 1 hour of meditation.

Level 6

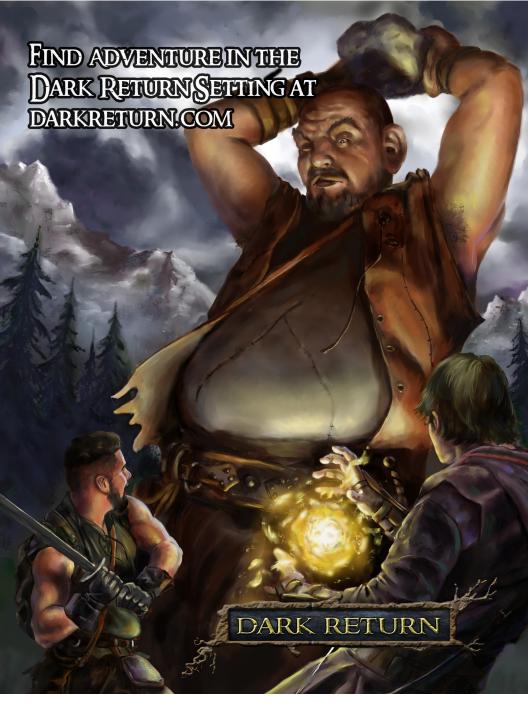
Floating Step: As a free action, you may spend 1 kai to move double your normal speed for a round. Your feet do not touch the ground when you do this but must have solid or liquid matter beneath you.

Level 7

Fluttering Jump: You may spend 1 kai to triple your jump.

Level 8

The Lethal Hand : You may spend 3 kai to add an additional 3d6 damage to an unarmed strike.



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