



# ALTERNATE HISTORY

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The concept of alternate history is one which provides an excellent source of material for Roleplaying Games. Take a ostensibly historical time and place, then tweak it so that a few personalities, discoveries or even core aspects of reality change. After which, imagine what precipitates out of those major events which follow. It provides a fascinating method of creating strange new worlds.

The earliest records we have of alternate history are rather mundane. The first was written by the Roman Author Livy, who wrote about an imaginative 4th Century BCE in his *Ab Urbe Condita*, wherein Alexander the Great took his armies west, instead of east. It was nothing more than a mental exercise contemplating whether it would have been Rome or Alexander who would have prevailed to create an empire, with an obvious bias in his conclusion. The first novel based on alternate history was a 15th Century romantic epic by Joanot Martorell who imagined a valiant knight called Tirant the White overthrowing the Ottomans to save Constantinople!

Since then the concept of alternate histories has been whole-heartedly adopted by science fiction, contemporary and even comedic authors, from H G Wells to Stephen Fry. Some of my favourites are books such as *The Many Coloured Land* or *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, with Pleistocene era aliens, psionics and Celtic myth in the former and 19th C British magicians in the latter. Despite their oddities, they are as much alternate histories as *The Man in the High Castle* by Phillip K Dick.

Perhaps the most influential work of alternate history in the early days of roleplaying games emerged from the comics scene of the late seventies. The seminal '*Adventures of Luther Arkwright*' by Bryan Talbot was a story concerning an apocalyptic battle across the multiverse between an advanced technological civilisation and the entropic Disruptors. Not only did it ram home the amazing idea of parallel universes, but also introduced readers to some wonderful alternate realities.

Indeed, the central premise of *Luther Arkwright* proposed an alternate Europe set around the late 1800's in which England is still caught in a prolonged civil war which has spanned centuries. Its parliamentarian government is commanded by the syphilis riddled witch-finder general Lord Cromwell, who keeps the country repressed under his

puritanical rule, whilst the royalists are led by King Charles. Meanwhile the rest of Europe are militarising in a lead up to the First World War with steam engine driven zeppelins. This rich melange of over four centuries of British history (amongst other parallels) was what made the short series so evocative.

Since *Luther Arkwright* will be published as a forthcoming setting for *RuneQuest 6*, we shall not tarry any longer with that particular setting. Instead we will look at how to construct your own alternate realities and what their key points are. There are several different aspects that we can use as the foundation for our alternate history, which can be simplified to those of TIME, REGION and CHANGES. These are framed as a series of tables which will make the outcome both random and strange. After all, it is the oddness which makes an alternate history so much fun to play in.

## WHEN DOES YOUR HISTORY DIVERGE?

The most important aspect of any alternate history is deciding when it should be set. The following table (on the next page) covers a range of time from prehistory to modern day times. Of course the prehistoric period is something of an oxymoron as we have no direct recorded history from those eras, yet we can potentially extrapolate events or happenings from human myth and archaeology. For instance a campaign based upon the Neanderthal peoples not becoming extinct, but surviving to engage the Cro-Magnons in a war for survival during the Palaeolithic.

When using the PERIOD TABLES, roll the specified dice for each column to find the particular year in which the campaign will be based. If PREHISTORIC is rolled, then ignore the CENTURY and YEAR columns, and roll on the PREHISTORY table instead.

## PERIOD TABLE

### Millennium

Roll 1d8	Millennium
1	Prehistoric (Roll on Prehistory table)
2	4 <sup>th</sup> Millennium BC
3	3 <sup>rd</sup> Millennium BC
4	2 <sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC
5	1 <sup>st</sup> Millennium BC
6	1 <sup>st</sup> Millennium AD
7	2 <sup>nd</sup> Millennium AD
8	3 <sup>rd</sup> Millennium AD

### Century

Roll 1d10	Century
1	10 <sup>th</sup> BC/1 <sup>st</sup> AD
2	9 <sup>th</sup> BC/2 <sup>nd</sup> AD
3	8 <sup>th</sup> BC/3 <sup>rd</sup> AD
4	7 <sup>th</sup> BC/4 <sup>th</sup> AD
5	6 <sup>th</sup> BC/5 <sup>th</sup> AD
6	5 <sup>th</sup> BC/6 <sup>th</sup> AD
7	4 <sup>th</sup> BC/7 <sup>th</sup> AD
8	3 <sup>rd</sup> BC/8 <sup>th</sup> AD
9	2 <sup>nd</sup> BC/9 <sup>th</sup> AD
10	1 <sup>st</sup> BC/10 <sup>th</sup> AD

### Year

Roll 1d10	Year
	As Rolled

## PREHISTORY TABLE

Roll 1d4	Era
1	Pleistocene
2	Palaeolithic
3	Mesolithic
4	Neolithic

*For example, a Game Master desiring to create a random alternate history begins by determining what period the game will be set in. Starting with the MILLENNIUM column a 7 is rolled, placing it in the 2nd Millenium AD. A second roll is then made on the CENTURY column, this time an 6, making it the 6th Century. Finally a percentage roll is made for the actual year resulting in a 20. Adding all these together the Game Master has a date of 1520 AD.*



## WHERE DOES IT OCCUR?

Next we need to know where this alternate history begins. The following table provides a list of continental regions which give a Game Master some idea of the global location it should occur. Whilst the regions cover large territories, no specific nations are included as few endure beyond a half dozen centuries, let alone a millennia, their borders constantly changing. The Game Master should first see what nations exist during the previously determined period, then select a few. They don't need to be the biggest, most advanced or even famous. Just those which peak their interest

### REGION TABLE

Roll 1d20	Continental Region
1	Northern America
2	Central America
3	South America
4	Caribbean
5	Northern Europe
6	Western Europe
7	Southern Europe
8	Eastern Europe
9	Northern Africa
10	Western Africa
11	Central Africa
12	Southern Africa
13	Eastern Africa
14	Western Asia
15	Central Asia
16	Southern Asia
17	Eastern Asia
18	Southeastern Asia
19	Australasia
20	Oceania

*Continuing our previous example, the Game Master takes a d20 to see in which region his alternate history will be set. He rolls a 2 - Central America. Not familiar with the region at that time, a quick check on the Internet reveals that the early 1500's the Aztecs ruled over much of Central America; so it makes sense to set the campaign in the Aztec Empire and then diverge its history from what was recorded.*

## WHAT HAS CHANGED?

After determining the time and place, we now need to contemplate what sort of change is necessary to make the alternate history both interesting and, more importantly, fun to play in. There are numerous areas of change which result in dramatic effects on history.

For instance, what if early Viking invasions of Britain and Ireland had utterly overthrown the established Christian faith, destroying all the churches and replacing it with Norse paganism?

This would mean Olaf Tryggvson might not have been baptised in Canterbury in 994, and thus Norway wouldn't be forcibly converted to Christianity. At least, not in the early 11th Century. Indeed if Norse culture had regarded Christian worship as a weakness, or worse still, a sign of unmanly behaviour, Britain, Russia and Normandy could have instead become bastions of paganism; which would have left Northern Europe as a potential target for the 1st Crusade. Interesting times!

An alteration of religious faith is only one possible, albeit powerful key change. Other

aspects which have a serious knock-on effect on culture are changes in political ideology, technological breakthroughs, catastrophic natural disasters, and so on. For a very subtle alternate history setting, only one of these would be enough to make the setting a fascinating place to game in. Yet if the Game Master wanted he or she could impose several key changes that could make the affected nations almost alien in their strangeness.

Roll on the CHANGE TABLE as many times as desired, then apply the change to the nation or culture you selected. Explanations of what these changes could be are investigated later in this article.

### CHANGE TABLE

Roll 1d20	Key Change
1	Astronomical Event
2	Battle Outcome Reversed
3	Climate Change
4	Devastating Weapon
5	Ecological Upset
6	Economic Boom or Bust
7	Geological Disaster
8	Great Leader Dies or Survives
9	Invaluable Resource Discovered
10	Invasion by Neighbours
11	New Philosophy
12	Outside Intervention
13	Plagues and Immunities
14	Political Ideology
15	Racial Genocide
16	Religious Persecution
17	Rulers Overthrown
18	Scientific Breakthrough
19	Technological Crash
20	Unexpected Alliance

## Astronomical Event

An astronomical event could be as simple as a comet providing a sign of forthcoming catastrophe, spurring a ruler or religion to change their mind concerning a matter of state - to the deadly nature of a major meteor strike on a nation at the crux of some historical event. For example what would have happened if the Tunguska strike had been delayed by five hours and struck Moscow instead?

## Battle Outcome Reversed

The most simple change to make to any established history, is to merely search for a major battle and reverse its outcome. Marc Antony winning the Battle of Actium, thus propagating the centre of the Roman power to Egypt and forever changing its main focus from Europe to Asia. Many of history's most famous battles have brought about the rise of a dynasty or fall of an empire.

## Climate Change

What could happen to the chosen region if it became warmer, colder, wetter or dryer? Would it cause widespread famine and migrations of people, or make the nation more bountiful, thus driving a burst of cultural development? South America has seen dozens of small empires rise and fall because of enduring weather changes, and similarly the survival of Norse settlements in the northern Atlantic.

## Devastating Weapon

The development of a radical new military weapon can overthrow the power balance between nations. What would have occurred if Nazi Germany had developed the Atom Bomb first, or if the Songhai Empire of Africa had developed massed gunpowder musketeers before the European nations?

## Ecological Upset

Thoughtless transfer of plants or animals can subvert or even overthrow an entire ecosystem, the arrival of mankind to Australia during the Pleistocene being a case in point. Introducing rats or toads can collapse the food chain forcing a nation to war in search of sustenance. Twisting it the other way, imagine a world where humans didn't discover the Americas until the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, leaving the entire continent up for grabs, yet still heaving with huge and deadly megafauna!

## Economic Boom or Bust

Collapsing economies are precursors of war or radical social upheaval, whereas prosperity encourages the opposite. Poverty tends to drive nationalism, racism and religious intolerance as people look around themselves for others to blame. The French Revolution for instance brought about the rise of Napoleon and his expansionist wars. But what if it had been France which discovered South America and looted its stores of gold, silver and other precious substances? Would the lives of the French peasants have been bolstered by the wealth brought back to their country thus bringing enlightenment without the need for bloodshed?

## Geological Disaster

Volcanic eruptions and mighty earthquakes, including their associated tsunamis, often place tremendous stress on the nations within which they occur. The explosion of Thera brought about the collapse of the Minoans, and soon after the Mycenaean city states. If the volcano had not erupted, perhaps 'Atlantis' would have spurred technology and philosophy to develop a millennium earlier and forged a pan-Mediterranean civilisation to rival that of Rome's.

## Great Leader Dies or Survives

What would have happened if Stalin had prematurely died at the end of the Second World War, or Alexander the Great had not died in Babylon but had gone on to conquer India and perhaps the entire Orient, living on as a tyrant until his 70's? It may seem that generals and politicians are the most influential personages in history, but scientists or religious leaders can have even more influence.

## Invaluable Resource Discovered

The discovery of valuable resources and the rush to exploit them have driven much of human history. Precious metals and hydrocarbons have formulated many invasions, even in modern times, but the lack of a resource is not necessarily the only aspect which can be exploited. Britain once overthrew an entire nation by capitalising on Opium and creating a drug culture which could only be satisfied via their near monopoly.

## Invasion by Neighbours

Although this can be caused by innumerable reasons, an invasion is often catastrophic to a region. Even if the invasion is not military in

nature, population displacement can bring famine as local food supplies are overstretched, revolutionise society with newly introduced ideas, cause religious tension as different faiths mingle, or simple population surplus lead to apartheid or slavery.

## New Philosophy

A new philosophy can have religious, political or ethical effects. If a national leader suddenly changes religion or decides to introduce a new justice system, it can radically change the course of history. Beneficial examples ostensibly include women's suffrage, secular government, and social welfare. Negative effects might occur such as the right to use those convicted of capital crimes as human guinea pigs, or enforced social castes.

## Outside Intervention

An outside intervention is pretty self explanatory. Usually this will be a large state or empire coming to the aid (or seek to take advantage of) a smaller nation, although the unforeseen efforts of a tiny region, association or religion can occur too. Alternate history does not necessarily need to constrain itself to mundane realism however. Intervention from a parallel plane of existence or aliens from another galaxy is just as permissible.

## Plagues and Immunities

Disease often has a dramatic effect on world history, the spread of smallpox devastating the population of the Americas for instance, or European armies laid low by Malaria or Yellow Fever. However, this change need not always be one of susceptibility. Imagine the world in 1895 if the Martians of H. G. Wells did in fact invade, but this time they were inoculated against microbial infections... or more prosaically, if the native American Indians had complete immunity against smallpox.

## Political Ideology

The advent or fall of political ideologies has often shaped human history. Communism, and Fascism, Republics and Democracies, each time they have been introduced or allowed to grow corrupt the cultural effects have been profound. An alternate history might change what actually happened by preventing the ideology to occur in the first place or by changing it entirely. Where might China be today if its last emperor had not abdicated in 1912, contributing to its military factionalism when it attempted to become a republic?

### Religious Persecution

Religious persecution often seems to occur, not only when two culturally different faiths come into contact with one another, but also when a faith suffers an internal schism. Whether driven by the passions of its believers, or cynically utilised by its priesthood as a political tool to garner power, religious persecution can force population exodus, genocide or civil war. However not all persecution is so harsh, some societies allowing pursuit of other faiths at the cost of becoming a second class citizen or paying higher taxes.

### Rulers Overthrown

The ruler of a nation, creed or organised religion can be overthrown for a multitude of reasons from war to failing to uphold the tenets of their beliefs. How the ruler is overthrown, and whether they survive to return are vital to consider. If William the Conqueror had failed to defeat the rebellions following his victory at the Battle of Hastings, he could have been deposed, opening the throne of England to one of the surviving Anglo-Saxon earls or Danish invaders.

### Scientific Breakthrough

New scientific developments change cause radical social, economic or military change. Cures for disease allow population growth, whilst the advent of steam and water power brought about the Industrial Revolution and all the ills and benefits of subsequent urbanisation. Not all scientific breakthroughs are necessarily advantageous, as Weapons of Mass Destruction or today's inescapable surveillance state now show, but always incur a major cultural and political effect. Neither does the breakthrough need to be technologically advanced, as a mere copper axe can be a radical development during the Palaeolithic.

### Technological Crash

Although there are few major technological crashes evidenced in history, they have happened. The ancient classical world was able to achieve the construction of sophisticated clockwork astronomical computers and proto-type steam motivation prior to the fall of their respective civilisations. The more modern the period however, the greater the sociological disaster which accompanies such a collapse. Something like a large scale Coronal Mass Ejection hitting the earth, a limited nuclear war, or uncontrolled spread of a highly lethal disease would have radical effects on the world of the last century.

### Unexpected Alliance

An unexpected alliance can produce economic or socio-political stability for a region, or conversely cause friction of those threatened or jealous by such a union. Whilst a strong union might deter financial or political meddling by others, it could also provoke direct attack if considered too threatening. Other examples could include erstwhile enemy nations suddenly switching sides to ensure their own survival.

### THE JOYS OF AN ARMCHAIR HISTORIAN!

The idea behind all of these tables is to aid in creating unique alternate histories, and not just another tedious 'What if the Nazis won WWII' scenario. Whilst the tables provide a much needed randomisation element to the design, users must understand that it is just a framework and that the Game Master must still perform a small degree of research to flesh it out. Hopefully it will encourage those who truly enjoy random generation to find new places and periods of history they have hitherto never known about.

*For the third step of our example, the Game Master decides to roll three times on the CHANGE TABLE and gets a 2, 17 and 18. These equate to BATTLE OUTCOME REVERSED, RULERS OVERTHROWN and SCIENTIFIC BREAKTHROUGH. Considering the campaign will be focussed upon 1520 in the Aztec Empire, the Game Master uses the BATTLE OUTCOME REVERSED to change the battle in Tenochtitlan (The Night of Sorrows) so that not only does Moctzuma survive, but he hunts down the fleeing Hernán Cortés, his conquistadors and their native allies, slaying them almost to a man.*

*As this as the foundation point of the alternative history, the Game Master extrapolates that Moctezuma pursues the handful of ragtag survivors back to Tlaxcala, which is destroyed in retribution for aiding Cortés. The incensed Aztecs then continue to the coast, burning every Spaniard and every village hosting them - incidentally preserving them from the Smallpox outbreak which would have occurred - until they discover the conquistador's ships. The Game Master then applies the SCIENTIFIC BREAKTHROUGH change, concluding that Moctezuma captures the vessels intact and has his finest engineers dismantle one of them to learn its secrets.*

*Now masters of ocean sailing ships, the formula for gunpowder and maps of the known world, Moctezuma soon realises that unless he acts swiftly and decisively, more conquistadors will arrive on his shores fomenting unrest and pillaging his lands for gold. Thus the Game Master applies the third change, that of RULERS OVERTHROWN, so that Moctezuma consolidates the entirety of Mexico under his newly captured cannon, enrolls the craftsmen of his empire to manufacture an armada, and launches an invasion of a hundred thousand warriors to conquer Spain and overthrow King Charles V.*

*Thus the campaign starts several years later with Portugal and parts of eastern France and Spain under the ruthless control of musket armed Aztec Jaguar and Eagle knights...*

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