

# PYRAMID



Issue 3/17 March '10

## MODERN EXPLORATION



### THE MAP'S DARK SPACES

by Kelly Pedersen

**MUMMY AMULETS**  
by Graeme Davis

**SHOVEL BUMS**  
by Ken Spencer

**THE BLACK BOX**  
by J. Edward Tremlett

# STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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*You call this archaeology?*  
– Professor Henry Jones,  
*Indiana Jones and  
the Last Crusade*

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Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

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*Brown:* In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)

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# IN THIS ISSUE

Do you think there's nothing new under the sun? Then you haven't made a breathtaking discovery while slogging through the sand, sloshing in snow, or sneaking beneath city streets – but after this issue of *Pyramid*, you might.

Using steam-powered technology over a century early to fuel their exploratory urges, the people of Pele-2 begin to fill in *The Map's Dark Spaces*. This alternate Earth and its enigmatic alien artifacts present both opportunity and danger to the Infinity Patrol. Incorporate this timeline into part of a larger **GURPS Infinite Worlds** campaign, or use it as a standalone setting for modern exploration adventures.

*The Black Box* reveals perhaps the greatest conspiracy in modern exploration – a secret that also keeps secrets. Some discoveries are best kept hidden, and these are the people to do it. Those who assist the Black Box have adventures they would never forget – if only they could remember.

Are **GURPS** explorers traipsing around Egyptian ruins becoming blasé about hordes of corpses coming after them? Graeme Davis, author of **GURPS Vikings** and **GURPS Middle Ages 1**, helps with that problem; simply give *Mummy Amulets* to some select adversaries and watch the heroes regain their respect for the afterlife.

On the more realistic side, *Shovel Bums* looks at the dirty world of real modern-day adventurers. Learn of the talents and techniques of these field archeologists, use the **GURPS** templates and lenses to make your own professional wanderers, and then drop them into the included occult campaign framework that makes best use of these unlikely heroes.

How can a GM add exploration to a modern campaign? Steven Marsh, Pyramid editor, offers one possibility in this month's *Random Thought Table*.

Of course, every exploration adventure worth its weight in gold has “one true” item needed to get past some insurmountable obstacle. *Curious Coins* provides one true artifact – and lots of red herrings – to help the GM add some mystery to the search.

Finally, once you've made it back to civilization, head over to *Odds and Ends* for morsel-sized mini-articles and a bit of humor from *Murphy's Rules*.

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# FROM THE EDITOR

## DIMINISHING DISCOVERIES, UNLIMITED ADVENTURE

This is the *Modern Exploration* issue of *Pyramid*, a sequel (of sorts) to last month's *Historical Exploration* issue. If all goes according to plan, next month we'll have the final part of our series, where we learn that Luke and Leia are brother and sis – whoops, wrong trilogy.

Later in this issue, we look at one aspect that sets modern exploration apart from its past and future counterparts (*The Accidental Explorer*, pp. 36-37). What we'll note here, in broad strokes, is how rewarding modern exploration can be – especially from a gaming standpoint.

Obviously, the number of discoveries possible by exploration goes down as the timeline approaches the modern age; once something's been explored, it's crossed off the list of potential milestones. (If space exploration picks up with any vigor, we'll see the number of vistas open considerably, but we'll revisit that another day.)

What's interesting, though, is that *because* there are so few discoveries left, those that remain tend to be fairly awesome; they are generally very difficult to reach, require incredible insight or research, and/or have otherwise avoided detection by lesser explorers. On the realistic side, there are the Lascaux cave paintings; likewise, the discovery of the *Titanic* wreckage a couple of

decades ago is another find that is only possible in the modern era. More fantastically, “modern” tales of the discovery of Atlantis have delighted the public for over a century, and Dan Brown has sold millions of books writing about globetrotting investigators who uncover unbelievable conspiracies hundreds (or thousands) of years old.

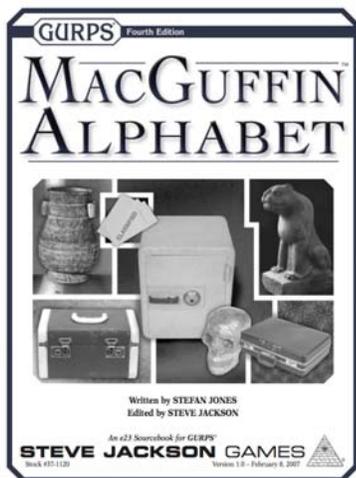
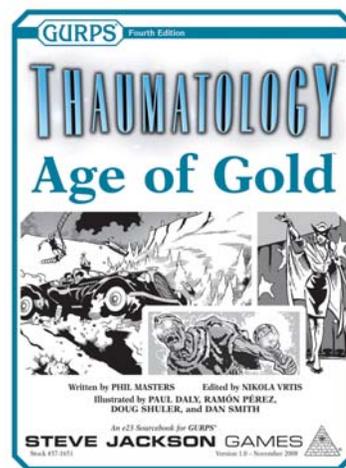
Of course, mention of highly skilled, determined (and lucky) explorers should ring any gamers' ears, since that's the textbook description of most PCs. “Rare modern exploration discoveries” and “gaming heroes” go together like peanut butter and jelly. You

can play a straight exploration campaign, include exploration as a change of pace for any modern-based setting, or mix modern exploration with just about any other genre: horror, cliffhangers, action, conspiracy, magic . . . you name it.

So let your mind wander to new and exciting possibilities involving modern exploration. Who knows what you'll discover?

## WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

Speaking of discoveries, did you uncover something so amazing in this issue that you want to encourage us to keep doing that? Or so horrific that it should have remained buried for all time? If so, send us a note at [pyramid@sjgames.com](mailto:pyramid@sjgames.com), or visit our electronic archeological site at [forums.sjgames.com](http://forums.sjgames.com).



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# THE BLACK BOX

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

At 5:35, EST, on January 11, Dr. Mary Mastronne (Ph.D. in archaeology, focus on Sumerian antiquities) was “collected” at her home by four U.S. Marshals. They told her she needed to come with them **now** and wouldn’t say why, except that it was a matter of national security. They told her husband, John, to expect no phone calls for at least 72 hours. Then they were gone.

At the 72nd hour, Mary called. She said she was fine, but that she was going to be away for a while. An “amazing opportunity” had come up, and she had to take it. She’d call if and when she could, but he’d just have to trust her.

Three months went by with no contact. John was frantic, but when he tried calling his representatives, he received a curt visit from an imposing man who reminded him this was a matter of national security.

“Just stop making waves, John,” he said. “Mary’s safe, doing what she does best. You should be happy for her.”

A month later, Mary was home. She was physically and mentally exhausted, but extremely happy. She was also \$100,000 dollars richer, having spent the last four months working to verify the dates and provenance of certain Sumerian artifacts that Interpol had intercepted from dangerous, well-connected smugglers – hence the secrecy.

Mary said she couldn’t talk about the details. She couldn’t even remember everything. But it **had** been important work, and she’d been happy to do it.

Every once in a while, though, when she was staring off into space, John couldn’t help but notice a strange look on her face. It was as if she were trying to remember something terribly important, some horrible memory she was trying to wrap her mind around, and allow out of her mouth, but never quite made it.

Most people consider modern scientific exploration is a mostly safe endeavor. People often think that centuries of learning from others’ mistakes have paved the roads to further study, and given several worst-case scenarios to prepare for. When preparation fails, the wonders of modern medicine and emergency services can save explorers who venture a little too far. People only die in freak accidents or from extreme bad luck.

This view is dangerously incorrect.

In the 21st century, exploration is more dangerous than ever. New technologies have opened up brand new vistas for discovery, but the tools and techniques needed to properly adventure within them are not always ready. There are some secrets that should stay buried, some places humans are not yet ready to venture into.

Some discoveries are too dangerous to be allowed outside the dig.

When explorers uncover something highly dangerous, or scientists encounter a problem that they cannot solve, the Black Box may become involved. This highly secretive international body can draft scientists and experts from any field to work on a project: unscrambling directions to find the way, finding solutions to deadly problems, and exploiting found items that baffle their discoverers. When the problem is solved, the Black Box has ways to ensure the silence of their draftees and contain what’s been uncovered.

Presented here for the first time – and at great risk – is the mostly unknown history of the Black Box, along with how it works, the three teams that make it work, and some of the secrets that keep it running. Modern-day games that feature exploration of the unknown, or cutting-edge science, as central or supporting themes could use the Black Box as a safety net, a plot device, or possibly even an adversary, depending on what the heroes are doing.

## A BOXED HISTORY

Simply put, the history of the Black Box is the secret history of the post-World War II world.

Before that time, science ran riot with little or no oversight. Expeditions that went too far off the map were usually swallowed up by the dark corners of the map, and dangerous discoveries that went awry could be contained by those too scared to understand them. Dead or insane explorers were a tragic fact of life, but they usually didn’t take too many victims along with them. For whatever reason – most likely greed or indifference – the powers that be decided that was just the way of things.

World War II changed all that.

Hitler’s demented archaeologists in the Ahnenerbe scoured the globe to find dangerous artifacts for his *Wehrmacht*, securing – but (fortunately for the Allies) not successfully *using* – the Spear of Destiny, among other things. The Soviets turned to many destructive forms of weird science to repulse the German army. And if a small group of competent people could produce something like Hiroshima, couldn’t anyone?

Worse, what if they made a mistake?

Those in the know realized that the stakes had been raised. A doomed expedition or remote lab could be written off, but now accidents might claim entire cities or turn the tides of an arms race. In addition, the Soviets now wanted the power of the Bomb, as well as access to Hitler’s dangerous secrets.

*Some of the early recruits to the Black Box may have encountered the Ahnenerbe in the race **Into the Temple of the Hungry Star**, an adventure outlined in **Pyramid #3/8: Horror & Spies**.*

# MUMMY AMULETS

BY GRAEME DAVIS

*Belkins held up his battery lantern and began to translate the hieroglyphs.*

*"Beware, all who would disturb the sleep of the great queen Aset-em-ankh. Her protectors are many and cannot die. You are few and mortal. Your souls shall be torn from your shattered bodies; the first shall feed the dread Am-met, and the second shall feed the worms."*

*Finnegan grinned reassuringly down at the slender archaeologist.*

*"Mummies aren't a big deal. A shotgun blast to the head'll take 'em out just like any other walking corpse. Fire, too. They go up like the Fourth of July. The only time we'll have a problem is if there are too many of them."*

Mummies don't get enough respect. Adventurers roaming the sands of Egypt or the museums of Europe will cut them down without a second thought on their way to the villain who animated them or the lich who commands them. This article offers the GM a way to redress the balance, and give players a healthy fear of the bandaged dead once more.

The ancient Egyptians buried their dead with a wide array of amulets, each intended to perform a specific function. Some of them also provided some protection to the living, but their primary function was always to help their mummified wearer make it through all the hazards – physical, magical, and theological – that lay along the path to resurrection in the afterlife.

**GURPS Egypt** gives interpretations of the heart, scarab, and *udjat* (eye of Horus) amulets, but it does not distinguish between living and mummified wearers. This article presents these and other amulets that can be used to turn a regular Egyptian mummy into a formidable foe.

## MUMMY AMULETS AND WIDE-EYED ADVENTURERS

Many of the amulets in this article are very powerful items that will bring a glint of avarice to the eyes of any player and make any GM nervous about PCs becoming immortal and invulnerable. The ancient Egyptians must have had similar

thoughts, because they had two ways of preventing tomb-robbers from gaining godlike powers from them.

### *Funerary Amulets*

Many cultures buried their dead with magical or religious objects intended to see the deceased safely into the afterlife. As well as protecting the body against physical or magical interference, these objects could have additional functions: bypassing divine judgment to ensure passage into the culture's heaven, providing health and strength, protecting the deceased against demons and other hostile spirits, and so on.

Funerary amulets work only on the dead (and undead). Worn by the living, they are usually nothing more than jewelry. Exceptionally rare and powerful pieces might kill a living person who puts them on, possibly transforming the resultant corpse into a zombie, but operate normally once the wearer is dead.

All the amulets described here are funerary. Some ancient Egyptian amulets – most notably the scarab – also came in a version for living wearers, with different effects. These are discussed briefly at the end of the article.

Not all funerary amulets are truly magical; those kinds are very powerful items, and only the very wealthy could afford them. Those who lacked the wealth and power to equip their dead with magical amulets provided nonmagical versions in the hope that they would have some beneficial effect. Some families may have included only one magical amulet with their dead, with mundane versions of others. Likewise, not every amulet was used in every burial.

### *Personalized Amulets*

The ancient Egyptians believed that a person's name was just as much a part of his being as the body and the different types of soul. In inscriptions, the names of pharaohs and other dignitaries are surrounded by the *ren* cartouche, which protected the name from being used in hostile magic.

Following the same thinking, many magical amulets bore magical inscriptions that included the name of the person for whom they were made and stopped the amulet from working on anyone else.

*What if the heroes need to pick the one "true" amulet from amid a group? The GM might use **Curious Coins** (pp. 21-24) to point the adventurers in the right direction.*

This is when a cultural resource management (CRM) firm is called in. In CRM, the goal is to mediate the impact of new construction on archaeological sites and, if necessary, excavate the site before the bulldozers come in. The usual client for a CRM firm is a governmental body, but developers, construction companies, and others may need to call on some archaeologists from time to time.

## ANATOMY OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

An archaeological site can be a confusing and dangerous place. There are trenches and open pits spread around, tools and heavy equipment lying about, and tents erected at key locations. This can present a bewildering sight for visitors and provide an excellent scene for combat encounters. The general layout for a site under excavation is to have a central tent that functions as a field lab and office, one or more test trenches, several open units (one-yard-square excavated pits), a few units covered with tarps, screens used to separate artifacts from soil, and an area where cars and heavy equipment (bulldozers, backhoes, and graders) are parked. At each open unit or test trench, the archaeologist working that location has a pile of tools and other sundries. There are also five-gallon buckets of soil sitting around, as well as bags of soil samples waiting to go to the lab for analysis (usually in 30-gallon trash bags). The whole area is also liberally marked with surveyor's pins and flagging tape. More remote sites have their own water supply (even if it's just pumped from the nearest creek) and a small tent city where the archaeologists retire for the evening.

Each site can be categorized by the phase of investigation it is in, numbered from I, II, and III.

### Phase I

Phase I sites are the initial investigation, and it is not always determined at this point that a site may be present. First, researchers investigate the area to determine where any sites may be located, with special consideration of the landscape and historical records. This is followed by a walking-surface survey – a long and often boring activity. Archaeologists walk an area that is suspected of containing a site looking for artifacts on the surface, probing the area by making four-inch-deep test holes with their shovels. Often these holes are 10 yards apart, and in a large area, that results in a lot of small holes in the ground. Areas that are very likely to contain a site may have a test trench dug. These trenches are usually three yards wide, 20 yards long, and four yards deep. By law they need to be braced before anyone enters (it takes less than a yard of collapsing soil to kill a person), but often in the interest of expediency are not. Archaeologists enter the test trench in order to look for artifacts and diagram the subsoil. If evidence of a site is found, the project may move to Phase II or, if there is enough money in the budget, ground penetrating radar or aerial photography is used to investigate further.

### Phase II

In Phase II, the site begins to look like the stereotypical archaeological excavation seen in movies. Phase I investigation continues in order to define the boundaries of the site while hand-excavated units are dug. A hand-excavated unit is dug by shovel and trowel in four-inch increments called levels. This soil is then dumped into buckets and taken to the screens where it is processed to remove the soil and leave the artifacts. After each level of a unit is excavated, it is diagramed and photographed before the next level is begun.

There are two types of screens that are commonly used, both worked by hand. A dry screen is a wire mesh in a frame that is rocked back and forth to shake the soil loose. A wet screen is of similar design, but uses water jets to rinse away the soil.

Most units are dug by pairs of archaeologists who take turns digging and screening. A tight bond usually develops between people working the same units for weeks on end.

*When we get to our survey areas, we grab our gear and start surveying. The main goal is for us to find sites – historic and prehistoric.*

*– Trent De Boer, Shovel Bum*

### Phase III

The final phase, Phase III, is much like Phase II but more intensive and with the aim of excavating the entire site. Most sites don't reach this stage as the Phase II investigation usually determines if the site is worth preserving; anything not an artifact is reburied, reports are typed, and the crew moves on. If a site is of great importance, is threatened with imminent destruction, or contains human remains, then Phase III is called for. Units are dug across the entire site and every artifact needs to be collected, plotted on a map, and analyzed. For an independent CRM company, this means steady work and lots of cash.

## CREATING A SHOVEL BUM

For heroic campaigns that border on the realistic, shovel bums should be built on 50-100 points. Most of the points should go into attributes and skills. Because all shovel bums have at least a bachelor's degree and the work is very strenuous, IQ and HT are the most important attributes. Shovel bums move a lot of soil in a normal workday – 25,600 cubic inches of dirt a day on average – so ST is good for moving heavy loads. DX applies to some of the more-relevant skills. Increasing Will, Per, and FP can also prove useful.

*An old-hand shovel bum might be "recruited" by the Black Box (see pp. 13-19) for interesting missions.*

## ABOUT *GURPS*

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of *GURPS* players. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! We can also be reached by e-mail: [info@sjgames.com](mailto:info@sjgames.com). Resources include:

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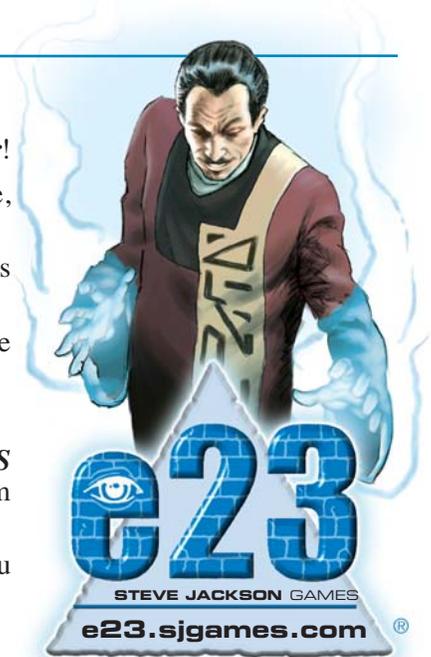
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