

# ✿ The Dying Earth: Colourful<sup>1</sup> Play ✿

*'Mincing murder, extravagant debauchery, while Earth passes its last hour'*

Lynne Hardy, one of the original play testers, discusses how the game actually plays.

There is one thing to keep in mind whenever you play Dying Earth and that is colour. The sky may be a deep, dark blue, the sun an unhealthy, bloated red but everything else (absolutely everything else) is in glorious Technicolor. That includes the people, the places, the clothes, the language, the hats – everything. Never forget it. This article isn't about game mechanics, although they are simple, elegant and have a great deal to do with the flavour of the game. It's about atmosphere, tone and above all, how to have a lot of fun in the Dying Earth. And it is a huge amount of fun.

Jack Vance's books rely on colourful, descriptive prose and whimsical, contrary characters dealing with odd and often dangerous situations. A major part of creating the right atmosphere, therefore, is in the detail. Let your descriptive powers run riot. The system can help you here – the different styles of *Persuasion*, *Rebuff*, *Attack* and *Defence* all help when describing situations in which they're used. If you can, try to make the dice rolling secondary almost to the description of what's happening: for example 'The extravagantly dressed dandy snorts in derision at your pathetically convoluted attempts to dissuade him from his course of action. With a deft twirl of his wrist, he draws his rapier and waggles it menacingly in your direction'. This sounds much better than 'Your Obfuscatory Persuade roll failed against his penetrating rebuff, so he's going to attack you with his finesse skill'. Be extravagant and imaginative in your descriptions of dismal failures and illustrious successes, because you're going to see a lot of them and they'll become very important to the game's progress. Try not to chortle too evilly during the dismal failure descriptions though, as you don't want to dishearten the players too much! However, don't get too bogged down in describing everything in minute and exacting detail as Dying Earth works best when it's flowing smoothly and freely. This may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it is something you'll get a feel for as you play. You'll soon recognise which bits need that extra level of description to add to the story and which bits will only slow things down. Vance himself uses immense levels of descriptive prose, but only when it's necessary to pique your interest!

Language is very important in the Dying Earth. It may seem verbose and flowery at first, but it really does enhance the game if people get into the spirit of that language. Taglines are tremendously helpful in giving everyone a feel for the sort of speech patterns to aim for, so don't be afraid to use them. They added a huge element of fun to our games and they can lead to some truly groan-worthy but memorable moments. Watching my players' beady eyes light up with delight when they saw an opportunity to slip (or shoehorn) in a tagline definitely added to my enjoyment in running the game. Try to encourage your players to speak in character by speaking in character to them. It might seem like a minor or even obvious point, but it really will help everyone. When we first started play-testing, we didn't know the books or the language and we were very unsure about what to expect or what was expected of us. The taglines gave us a big clue, but it wasn't until we started to speak in character that we began to feel more confident and most importantly,



*A typical mages' workroom. Sadly, the vat creation from which the bystanders are fleeing destroyed the workroom shortly after this sketch was executed.*

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1. As Lynn is not from the US, we have indulged her incongruous British spelling.

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MAGIC IS IMPORTANT in the *Dying Earth*, so encourage your players to put it to good use. Our most memorable moments all involve the use of magic – well, the misuse of it, anyway. It all helps to set the atmosphere. Your players are very important in setting the tone of this game. Every game I ran was a joint, co-operative effort on all our parts, with the players suggesting ways for the game to go just as much as I did. I hate to admit it, but often their ideas were better than mine so I used them instead. Again, this may seem like I'm stating the obvious, but *Dying Earth* does work best as a free flowing exchange of ideas between everyone involved. The term story-telling has almost become clichéd in role-playing circles these days, but that is what you're aiming for here: to tell a damn fine story.

started to enjoy ourselves.

Perhaps it might benefit your group to have an in-character chat before you get down to the first game, to give the players time to describe their characters to each other, find their feet in conversation, and relax.

Another thing to keep in mind is that everyone is out for themselves because, after all, it is nearly the end of the world y'know. Unlike in many traditional role-playing games where the party is more or less expected to work together towards a common goal, in *Dying Earth* that constraint is much less important. Some of the funniest moments in our games resulted from the characters attempting to surreptitiously get one over on their associates without getting caught. My group also never really saw the need to plan anything together, which generally led to all-out chaos as their plans always interfered with each other. Dissolving a hole in the side of a giant fish tank while your compatriots are stood in front of it isn't going to make your character particularly popular (especially when you nearly drown one of them) but it does lead to a lot of laughs out of character.

Your players' characters aren't the most important or the most powerful people in the world, either. That alone can lead to interesting situations and they just can't expect to just walk in anywhere and get their own way. Whilst this may come as a nasty surprise to some people, using lateral thinking and sheer cunning to get what you want is far more fun than wading in there with all spells blazing. Things have a bad habit of coming back to haunt you in the *Dying Earth*, so caution and guile are strongly recommended, especially if you don't wish to end up as the new exhibit in an irate arch-mage's curio collection. The *Dying Earth* gives you a great opportunity to keep your players on their toes, so make full use of it.

Don't expect things to go to plan. This may sound like a bad thing, but trust me, the game comes into its own when disaster strikes. Because of the nature of the mechanics there is a very strong chance that things won't go the way either you or your players were expecting, especially with beginning characters or when using magic. This should only add to the fun, not ruin everything. I'll swear that the dice know when you're trying to cast spells because that was when my group had a tendency to louse up big time. A word of advice: unless your group is planning to make their living as a demolitions team, be very wary of the *Excellent Prismatic Spray*. I'll say no more, but just you wait and see the first time your group uses it. Or should that be fails to use it?

If initially, like us, you don't know much about *Dying Earth* it can seem a bit intimidating at first. Please don't let that put you off because there really isn't anything to be afraid of. *Dying Earth* is grandiose, magnificent and challenging. Like all new settings, you just have to get used to it and find your own comfortable place within that setting. In the face of all that detail it can be nerve wracking to wing the details, but do it. After all, this is now your game and you're doing this for your enjoyment. From knowing little about the world, we went on to have some of the best, most creative and most enjoyable games our group has ever had.

**So, remember, try to keep it fun, flowing but above all colourful!**

**WANTED: erb skins**  
Must be clean and ideally no longer attached to the erb.  
Announce yourself at the Scholasticarium and ask for an appointment with the student Thaumaturgist Panakina.