

Adventuring

With the Seven Samurai

Bringing Life to a Classic Scenario Idea

By Peter Schweighofer

A lone village hires mercenary warriors to defend it against villainous enemies—comics, films, novels, and television use this idea time and again. Akira Kurosawa was one of the first to bring the plot to the silver screen in his 1954 classic, *Seven Samurai*. John Sturges translated the story to the wild West and introduced it to American audiences in his *Magnificent Seven*. Although Americans can more easily identify with the Western, Kurosawa's film takes more time to delve deeply into the story's nuances of characters and circumstances. Rent either one on video and you'll find a treasure-trove of adventure material. If you haven't seen the films, you'll find an in-depth outline for running this classic scenario here.

The plot is simple. A village plagued by marauding bandits hires seven hungry samurai willing to work for food. After proving themselves to each other through feats of warrior prowess or wit, the samurai fortify the town and train the farmers as best they can while dealing with internal tensions and conflicting personalities. When the brigands attack, the samurai employ a variety of tactics to whittle down their numbers: picking them off as they fumble over the village defenses, setting out on surprise raids, and luring them into the guarded streets a few at a time. Eventually they defeat their adversaries, but not without great losses among their own ranks and those of the farmers.

Across the Genres

Although much of the film focuses on farmers and bandits—typical elements in a medieval campaign—the *Seven Samurai* plot works in nearly every genre with a few minor adjustments:

Fantasy: A remote village, monastery or defenseless manor requires the mercenaries' aid against brigands or the local band of monsters. To make things a bit more interesting, one tribe of creatures hires the characters to help them against another more aggressive and more powerful monster clan.

Science Fiction: A backwater agricultural colony needs protection against ruthless gangsters who terrorize outlying settlements for their personal entertainment and profit. Perhaps colonists on a distant world compete against alien raiders or space pirates who pillage the colony for supplies and slaves.

Horror: A small town or isolated mansion requires the characters' aid against undead hordes or some other supernatural threat which returns to torment the inhabitants at a particular time of the year. These paranormal forces could seek some item hidden among the defenders, or might require a sacrifice before dispersing.

Espionage: The operatives hole up in a remote village where the enemy finds and attacks them before a friendly agency can extract the team. They must band together with the townsfolk and defend themselves against the ruthless opposition.

Cyberpunk: An oppressed group on the fringes of society begs the mercenaries for help against their enemies, including gangs, crime lords, corrupt corporations and crooked politicians. They possess evidence to end their adversary's reign of terror, but it's useless if they can't hold out for a few days in a hidden safehouse until the local news reporter can clear his schedule, retrieve the information from them, and verify their data. The characters are hired to protect not only the secure location but the reporter's life.



Swashbuckling: As pirates, the characters find themselves beset by corrupt colonial officials and rivals. Perhaps these enemies besiege a friendly settlement and the group must rush to their aid. Maybe survivors of an almost annihilated pirate band seek shelter with the characters and offer to pay them a vast treasure to protect them from the authorities... who are hot on their heels.

Pulp Adventure: The mercenaries agree to help a young woman whose brother, father or husband has gone missing with an archaeological expedition. After braving the treacherous journey, the characters must help defend the desperate archaeologists against an impending attack by savage natives or the more ruthless competitors.

Three Episodes

The *Seven Samurai* contains three main sections which easily translate into episodes within an adventure: recruiting, preparation, and siege. You can run these sections all in one gaming session, or expand them into a three-scenario mini-campaign.

Recruiting

The adventure opens as the beleaguered farmers approach one character or the entire group in a nearby city, road, or other location familiar to your existing campaign. The villagers implore the mercenaries to help them—they are little more than down-trodden farmers who will no doubt die if they do not receive assistance against the bandits.

To involve the mercenaries in this scenario, the villagers must possess something they want. They seem to have little to offer,

but that you can play off the characters' weaknesses to entice them to aid the farmers. Food is a good motivation, though it doesn't figure much into roleplaying. Perhaps the villagers have some long-forgotten treasure they're willing to give up, or a rare spell component one of the characters needs. Maybe they'll trade a valuable service or other goods farmers have (horses, seeds for rare plants). In more futuristic games, the settlers may know the location of an old spaceship with parts the characters require; the village might even be built over the vessel. One citizen might have information the group needs, but won't share it unless the mercenaries help the farmers.

If the characters are on the run, or have a particularly nasty and persistent adversary after them, the remote village might offer them a temporary haven. Reminding the characters that they need to stay low for a while might help—the unexpected appearance of their own enemy or his minions might spur them to defend the farmers just to get out of sight.

If you're just starting a campaign, you might allow the characters to introduce themselves through short encounters with each other during the recruiting process. The mercenary the farmers initially approached is interviewing for qualified participants in the village's defense. The "interview" might include a test of their combat, magical or technical abilities, a challenge of wit or patience, or some bond of friendship.

Preparation

For this stage you'll need a village—one with a map upon which characters can oversee construction of makeshift fortifications, lay traps, and plan defense strategies. You can make a quick map or use one from an existing source.

For a home-made map, draw up a diagram showing the village buildings clustered in the center (mostly barns, storehouses and dwellings), with a few roads leading off in several directions. Perhaps there are a few outlying buildings—a farm or two, and a mill—which cannot be incorporated into the central town defenses. Surround the village with several terrain features: hills, fields, swamps, streams, forests. These provide resources for the characters' fortifications, plus obstacles or approaches for the enemy.

For an easy map, check out some published scenarios for various games. Many adventures feature a village of some kind, and most include maps of the town and surrounding area. Many game rulebooks and supplements provide sample village maps, too. You'll also find some quick village maps I've created and dropped into this article. Use all your available map resources—you're borrowing the plot, why not borrow the map?

Spread the map out so everyone can see it. Give the players time to examine the terrain and brainstorm some defensive measures. This gives you time to formulate a general attack strategy, though one which should be influenced by the village *before* the mercenaries begin erecting fortifications. If nobody knows exactly when the attack might come, you might limit the players' strategy session to a set amount of real time—anywhere from ten to thirty minutes.

Published Map Resources

Scanning my gaming bookshelf, I can think of several resources containing village maps that might suit a *Seven Samurai* theme adventure:

- Several first and second edition *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* modules come to mind as having suitable village maps: *T1 The Village of Homlet*, *N1 Against the Cult of the Reptile God*, and *Cleric's Challenge II*. Page through your *D&D* collection and you're bound to find maps for small towns.
- The appendices of the *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* gamebook (Games Workshop, 1986) include maps of a typical way temple, farmstead, and Reikland village.
- *Galaxy Guide 1: A New Hope* revised and expanded for the second edition of the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game* (West End Games 1995) actually contains a scenario in which the heroes must defend a community of moisture farmers on Tatooine from rampaging Tusken Raiders. It includes a map of the settlement.

The farmers believe they'll be attacked by about 30 well-armed bandits. (This may or may not be the case, considering the oppressed villagers might be exaggerating out of fear.) The town contains 50 citizens able-bodied enough to wield a simple weapon in battle, with the lowest morale and greatest chance of fleeing when faced with the enemy onslaught. They're hard workers, though, and willing to do whatever the characters feel is needed to defend the village...within reason. A farmer won't mind guarding a wall and firing over it at the bandits, but won't make a stand with no cover against an onrush of opponents. Remember, they're more effective in their natural environment of the village than fighting in the open.

Allow the characters to focus the villagers on certain reasonable defensive tasks. For instance, the farmers can erect a makeshift wall surrounding their town using logs and the outermost dwellings, but they can't build a 50-foot-high stone wall with a battlement and gatehouse. Some ideas for defensive measures the farmers can reasonably conduct include building barricades between buildings and across roads; digging moats and ponds to snare enemy soldiers and slow their approach; assembling scarecrow sentries to post along walls; dismantling bridges leading to the village; preparing pit traps and setting wooden spikes into earthworks.

The villagers believe the enemy will attack when their spoils will be most profitable. Make sure the characters can construct just enough defenses in this time—perhaps two or three weeks. The arrival of enemy scouts is a good indication the bandits are not far off and that work should be hastily completed.

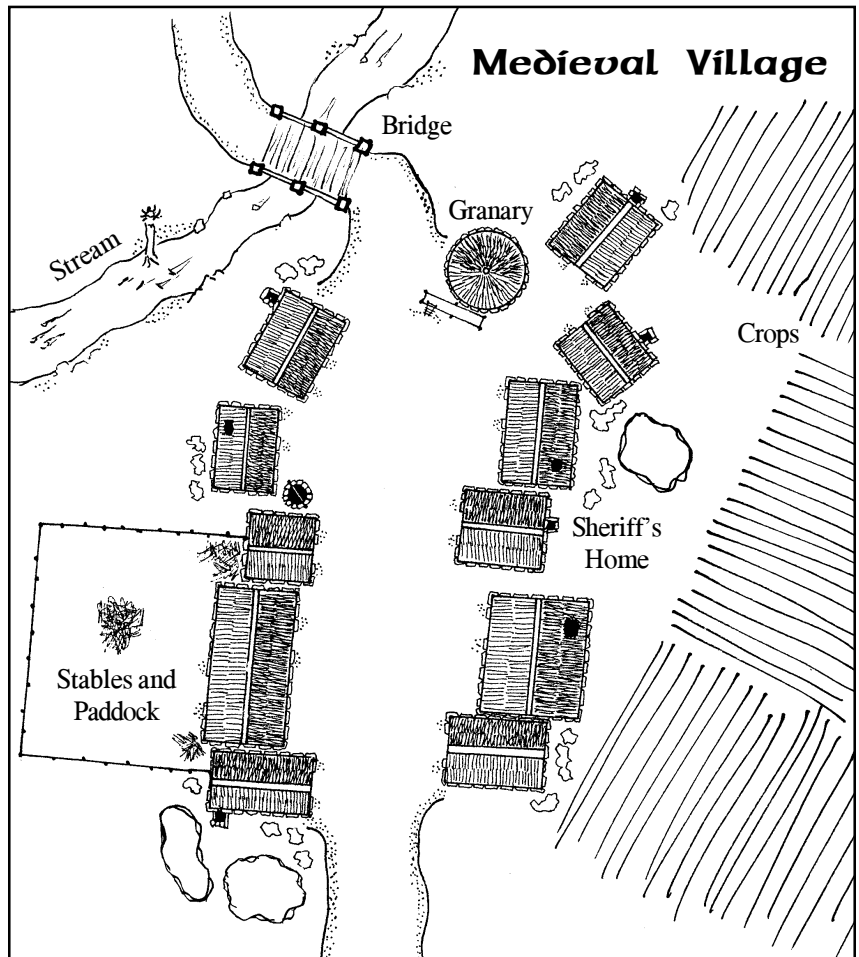
Fortifications alone won't deter the enemy, and the characters can't fight them off alone. They must train the villagers into viable combat units using basic weapons available in that genre. Such groups can perform simple duties, but need direction from the mercenaries during the heat of the battle. A unit could be trained to guard a weak point, hunt down wounded enemies within the village, or block a small opening intentionally left to allow a few bandits inside. During these exercises, the characters' effectiveness on the villagers can be gauged by the time they take, or perhaps several roleplayed encounters of military drills. The more detailed and entertaining the roleplaying, the more competent a fighting force the farmers should become. You might improve the villagers' morale or combat abilities for good roleplaying during training exercises. If the characters are overly degrading and oppressive with their trainees, morale could drop and the mercenaries might find themselves fighting the brigands alone.

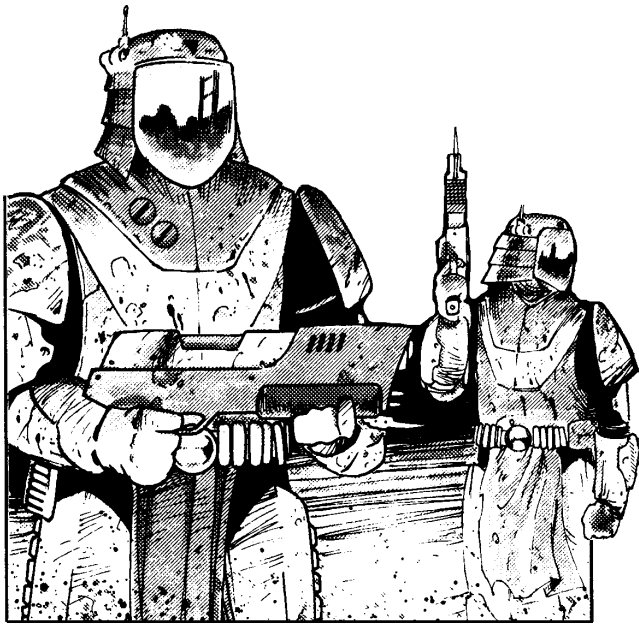
Complications

While training the farmers and building defenses, several internal conflicts between the mercenaries and villagers might erupt. Pick a few to add some tension to this phase of the scenario and challenge the characters with some roleplaying puzzles.

Villagers Fear Mercenaries: When they first arrive, the characters discover the village is empty. Nobody emerges from the homes to greet them. The farmers have infected themselves with fear that these mercenaries are no better than the enemy—that they'll take their spoils, kill them, and burn down the town. The characters must somehow convince the farmers that they're here to help fight the enemy, not destroy the village. Some show of gentleness or generosity might help. Or, as in *Seven Samurai*, a false alarm that "The bandits are coming!" might draw the villagers from their homes and show how much they're relying on the mercenaries' protection.

Hidden Wealth: The characters discover these farmers aren't as poor as they thought. One particularly proud villager shows up for training with a fancy weapon one normally wouldn't expect a meager farmer to possess. It seems it's one of many the villagers hid away, taken from wounded bandits, fleeing warriors, or dead mercenaries...ones like the characters. They are easily induced to share these resources if convinced they can save their village. The weapons and equipment are not enough to quickly defeat the enemy, but they'll help. The villagers might also possess more of the resources they promised the mercenaries as payment, which they might gladly negotiate to share if the characters angrily threaten to leave.





Dissension: A division forms between two groups of farmers disagreeing over the strategy for defending the village. Those whose homes or businesses stand outside the fortifications might wish to leave their posts to defend their own property. Perhaps one family's home must be dismantled for the defenses, or must give up precious resources to equip the mercenaries or the training villagers. The characters must make a solid argument for the safety of many over the good of a few. If they eloquently and effectively convince this dissenting faction to rejoin the village's efforts, the group serves with much greater dedication than the others to ensure their sacrifices aren't in vain.

Prominent Villagers

During training, fortification, and other complications, the characters get to know several key villagers aside from the town chieftain and those who recruited them. They can generate small encounters to liven work on defenses and the tedium of drilling, or they might play integral roles in any complications listed above.

Town Elder: This venerable elder isn't much use in building fortifications or fighting bandits, but constantly lends moral support the mercenaries' plans. Despite the farmers' constant bickering, dissension, and fear of the characters, the elder continually reminds them that if they were capable of defending themselves, they wouldn't have hired the mercenaries. If you find the characters have reached an impasse with villagers on some point, use the town elder to step in and remind everyone that the farmers are experts in a peaceful field, while the mercenaries are more skilled in military matters.

Protective Father: A father among the villagers is particularly worried the mercenaries will corrupt his beautiful teenage daughter. He might fear the characters could make romantic advances toward her, or convince her to join them and leave the town for a life of faraway adventuring. To protect her, the father cuts her hair, dresses her as a boy, and hides her somewhere within the village.

You can easily change this character to a mother protecting her young, handsome son if the majority of the mercenaries are female. At some point the characters accidentally encounter the hidden son or daughter and expose the parent's secret—and mistrust. The encounter could lead to a confrontation with the parent and other farmers afraid of the mercenaries, and might create some romantic tension with the attractive son or daughter. This character can also serve as an effective focal point for the "Villagers Fear Mercenaries" complication.

Goofy Recruit: This extremely old or very young farmer isn't really fit for military duty, but wants to do his part defending the village. He performs drills like everyone else, but just can't hold his weapon correctly, march in order, or figure out right from left. Despite his confusion, he's completely dedicated to the mercenaries. This character can provide some comic relief during training, and might lighten tensions during minor conflicts within the village.

Village Tactician: One farmer thinks he knows more about defending the village than anyone else—including the characters. He's quite vocal in his beliefs, often ordering others around, constructing his own defenses, and conducting training drills. You might play this character as a serious, egotistical farmer to present a challenge to the mercenaries' authority, or as a complete buffoon to add some comic relief. This villager can also serve as an effective focal point for the "Dissension" complication.

Troubled Spouse: One of the villagers seems particularly vindictive against the enemy, working harder to reinforce defenses and training constantly. This farmer voices his or her anger against the enemy, but becomes stubbornly quiet if asked where this dedicated emotion originates. In truth, this villager's spouse was caught or killed by the enemy several seasons ago, and might still be serving them in captivity. For an interesting twist, the captured spouse has since joined the bandits' cause and now serves as an active member in their plans to raid the village.

Siege

The adversaries appear just as the characters complete the fortifications and finally whip the farmers into some semblance of a fighting force. As gamemaster, you maneuver the enemy forces attempting to penetrate the town's defenses. Playing fair becomes a real challenge since you have an omniscient view of the fortifications and traps the characters planned. Keep track of how many bandits and leaders you send against the town...and how many the characters dispatch in each attack.

Assume the brigands are aware of anything they can see from outside the village—to gain more intelligence, they might send scouts to investigate the perimeter, and possibly get picked off by the characters. After probing the town's defenses, the enemy finally makes a desperate move, forcing a final confrontation. Remember, the bandits want something inside the village, too, so destroying it defeats the purpose of raiding the settlement for spoils.

You can follow the three basic attack stages below, or create your own using these as guidelines.

Initial Charge

When the bandits first arrive, they charge in with full force, expecting to storm the village and enter without opposition. They follow this plan until the town's defenses become obvious. If these preparations are carefully concealed, the initial attack might give the farmers a chance to eliminate a few adversaries foolish enough to stumble into or near defenses.

When they realize something's wrong, the bandits mill about for a few moments in confusion, then withdraw momentarily to revise their assault plans. This gives the characters a chance to check out the bandits for the first time, determining their true number and armament. Depending on the attackers' nature, they might hurl insults at the villagers and mercenaries, silently stare into their ranks, or retreat to stand ominous guard from a distance.

Once the extent of the village defenses are discovered, the enemy pulls back to more fully reconnoiter the situation.

Probing Defenses

Now that the brigands know the mercenaries are helping to defend the village, they adopt a more cautious strategy. Instead of assaulting the town in one massive charge, the enemy decides to test the defenses for weak spots through smaller, more carefully planned attacks. They don't have time for a lengthy siege, so they may resort to desperate measures.

In their rage against the farmers, the bandits attempt to obliterate everything within their reach—basically anything valuable to the villagers not contained within their defenses. The enemy destroys homes or businesses left outside the town walls, burns fields or other property, and slaughters animals left to wander on their own. The brigands yell triumphantly at each successful such attack they make, taunting the villagers and possibly causing dissent among their ranks.

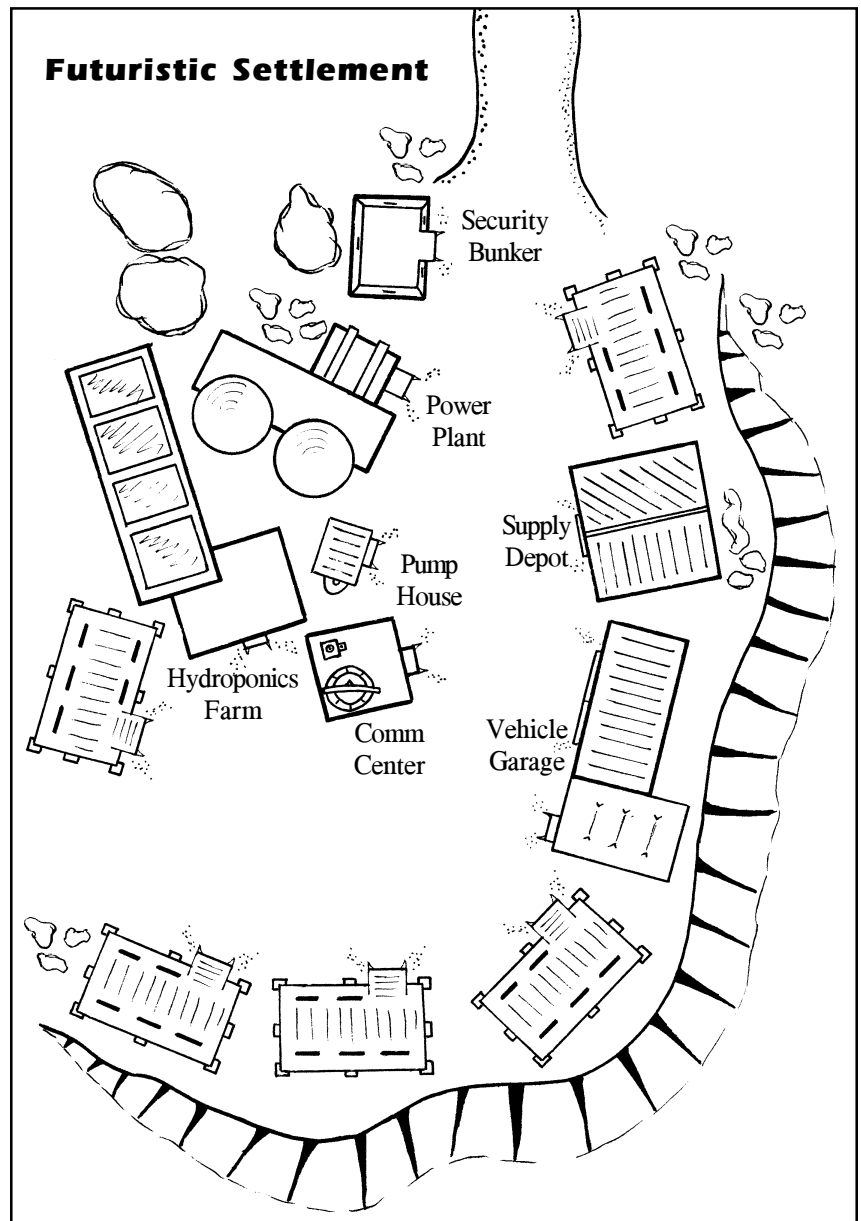
The enemy might withdraw from the village to lull the townspeople into a false sense of victory. The bandits must only hide out of sight long enough, retreating over a hill or around a bend in the road. If they don't attack for a few hours, the farmers relax their guard—but the characters know their adversaries won't give up so easily. This tactic can help pave the way for more subtle approaches, particularly a secret night raid or an assassination attempt on the mercenaries.

At night small groups of bandits creep up to the village and try penetrating sentry posts and other points of entry where guards might be weak, sleeping, or incompetent. Once discovered, they attack anyone nearby, pressing into the town when they've created a solid opening, or hastily retreating when their situation is vulnerable. A few such forays can help liven up

tedious evening watch duty, and could give the adversaries an opportunity for a momentary breakthrough.

Since the farmers would have no chance without the characters leading them, the mercenaries become primary targets. Perhaps the enemy concentrates attacks at locations with the most characters, or commanded by the most obvious (or loudest and most flamboyant) leader. They might use a secret weapon (see below) to pick off the mercenaries, or sending assassins to dispatch them.

The bandits might use diversionary tactics to create weak spots in the town's defenses. They could send what seems a concentrated assault against one point—hoping to draw off defenders from other posts—while a smaller force tries penetrating a weakened position opposite this attack.



Final Confrontation

As the enemy forces begin dwindling after each foray against the town, they realize they must attempt one final assault or abandon their siege entirely. As gamemaster, you must plan this climactic attack around the remaining village defenses, and any new measures the mercenaries have taken to redeploy their own forces.

The best strategy is to penetrate the town's weak point and pour all the bandits through that breach. You might wait until some of the combat complications listed below set in to provide a better opportunity to force a climactic confrontation and give the mercenaries a chance to end the attack.

Lax Guard Duty: Some villagers begin fading after days of defending the walls and long nights staying awake to guard against clandestine attacks. Perhaps they become despondent, believing they'll never vanquish the adversary. Their victories might lull them into a false sense of security—and celebrations might take their toll on guards' abilities to patrol posts. This creates a weak link in the town's defenses, one the brigands can exploit to open a hole into which they can finally pour all their forces and attack the settlement from the inside.

Enemy Secret Weapon: The mercenaries face some secret weapon in their adversary's hands. Perhaps the characters don't realize the bandits possess this armament, or they might find they have no defense against it. In the *Seven Samurai*, the brigands had three primitive muskets which struck fear into the villagers and mercenaries. Such a weapon might include magical powers, a mystical artifact, or anything else giving the enemy an unfair advantage over the characters. Although capturing one of these weapons might provide an interesting encounter, they can help create an opening through which the enemy can burst into the town for the final battle.

Weather: Neither the characters nor the bandits can control natural occurrences, but they can work in both of their favors. High winds or driving rain might prevent some forms of attack (possibly invalidating the enemy's secret weapon). An earthquake or flood could destroy some of the village defenses and provide a breach through which the bandits could attack. Bad weather conditions make fighting and maneuvering more difficult for everyone...and pushes the adversary to more desperate measures in the climactic confrontation.

When the Smoke Clears

How close the enemy comes to winning this final battle is up to you as gamemaster. The degree of desperation on the players' part should reflect the kind of campaign you're running. Remember to keep track of how many enemies are left to dispatch. When the bandits are finally defeated, mercenaries and farmers alike collapse in relief.

Now that the threat is gone, the villagers begin returning to their peaceful way of life. The characters, as warriors, don't belong here anymore. They collect the prize the settlers promised them and prepare to move on to the next adventure in your saga.



Their actions here won't be forgotten, however; their bravery protecting the town brings a few more rewards than the usual experience points. You might use the village as a small base of operations for the next few scenarios, providing a friendly haven where the characters can find equipment, provisions, and respite from new adversaries. You could use any new friendships struck with particular farmers as hooks for future adventures, or as helpful non-player-character resources.

Thanks to their dedication and courage, the characters have created a place where they're welcomed, even if by lowly settlers with little to offer besides their homes, food, and loyalty.

Text, maps, and adventure concepts
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