

Sinister Things <> 80 Columns of Love
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I'm tired of the whole xenon thing so I'm changing my thing to something more sinister. :) The domain name is up, but it is parked at the old site for now. The email address will change eventually. In honor of the change, and to indulge something I have wanted to do for a while[1], I present this month's zine is glorious, eighty-column plain text. Feel the love.

Ignorable Theme for Issue #358

One of my fellow players in the DC Heroes and Changeling campaigns mentioned some D&D/d20 book that "had lots of cool feats." This review of WotC's Complete Adventurer refers to new feats as cool several times:
<http://www.3rdedition.org/reviews/viewer.asp?id=98> The problem is that I do not know what a "cool feat" is or what makes a feat cool. In some ways "cool" is like "funny" or "erotic"--if you have to explain it, then the point is lost.

I do think uniqueness is a major factor in "cool". To do a thing that no one else can (such as a signature move or power), or to do a thing better than anyone else can (the names Gretzky and Moses come to mind), typically qualifies as cool. Once anyone can do it as well as you can, then you are no longer cool--you are ordinary. Likewise, NPCs are cool if they can do things the PCs cannot. Thus, I think feats, races, etc. are only considered cool for as long as they are new; once they become commonplace, they are no longer cool. And so, I think there will always be a market for new, cool feats, races, etc. There may be a time when fatigue sets in and nothing really new and cool is written, but that is usually the time the next edition is rolled out.

Another factor is that cool has to provide some benefit, even if only aesthetic. Unique but pointless is just lame, not cool. In terms of feats, cool and powerful are often synonymous, especially as feats stack. Something can be cool just because it looks cool, but how do you why something looks cool or not?

This ethereal thing we call "cool" is what separates games that have wide appeal with those that are excellent, but nonetheless languish on the shelf. WotC and White Wolf rule cool. Elegant, clean, functional, utilitarian, and do-it-yourself are not cool. To gamers at large, it appears that Hero and Fudge are not cool, but Exalted and Dogs in the Vinyard are. And I cannot explain why.

Comments on Issue #356 (Continued)

Paul Cardwell <> I have no problem with character improvement. I have a problem with the way it is handled in most games. It surpasses my threshold of disbelief (it is much too fast and too mechanical) and I find it distracting to the emotional and personal development of my characters.

Myles Corcoran <> Your description of Star Trek (Starship) Tactical Combat Simulator sounds very much like Battlestations, no doubt inspired by the former.

Michael Cule <> Mekton Zeta features two types of PCs: Professionals and Rookies. The latter started with fewer skills but advanced more quickly. I do not know how well this worked in practice. <> Perhaps your lack of attachment for your Traveller characters was a result of the random character generation. Would you feel the same about a 300 point GURPS character with a background and life path

you created? Rather than earn standard experience points, the characters would earn (and lose) Patrons, Contacts, and other advantages.

Robert Dushay <> I think we have to distinguish between behavior that is criminal versus behavior that is simply unethical or short-sighted. My commentary is aimed at the latter two. Despite earning six- or seven-figure salaries, greedy corporate officers can strip-mine their companies (as well as their investors and employees) for tens of millions. The current incentive systems encourage this behavior with no stick to discourage it. I agree with you that "most excess don't believe in any social contract." The Christian Science Monitor quoted a study[2] showing that executives who are paid far above the salary of the average worker are less concerned about ethics than those with more modest salaries. <> You made nice points on Bush's inconsistent "Christian" morality. I respected the late John Paul II's consistent stand against both abortion and capital punishment; I disagreed with it, but I respected his argument.

Louis La Mancusa <> Spelljammer was the last (A)D&D product I ever bought. <> Regarding "Battlestar Galactica," The Internet Movie Database (or similar site) is your friend.[3] <> Do you realize that Paranoia is supposed to be run as a comedy? My problem with Paranoia is that gamers are rarely as funny as they think they are. <> You need to read your own zines. RPGs avoid modern settings (without fantasy elements like those in V:tR or Buffy) for the same reason you did not like Traveller (which at least had the benefit of being a science fiction game). <> As others have said, I.Q. tests only measure ones ability to take IQ tests. Comparing IQ scores across boundaries of language, culture, age, etc. is utterly meaningless.

Paul Mason <> While I agree that characters should not be aware of the genre conventions, they nevertheless must have genre-appropriate expectations so as to perform genre-appropriate actions even if they are unrealistic. At some point, the characters might very well think, "They're just mooks, we can take 'em! It's their boss we're after!" <> Dungeons provide more "freedom" because the GM has everything laid out in advance and can handle whatever the players might try to do. In a wide-open city or wilderness, the GM's ability to improvise may be stretched to the breaking point, which leads to the development of rails as a means of keeping the players within the prepared corridors of the adventure.

Brian Rogers <> Too many gamers mistake "external roleplaying" with scene-hogging and overacting. The best internal roleplaying leads to subtle, quality external roleplaying that contributes more to the communal experience than any excessive externalizing ever does. But then, subtlety is not a common gamer trait.[4]

Marco Subias <> As a libertarian, veteran, and teacher, where do you stand on the billions spent on the war? Or the deficit generated from the increased spending and reduced revenue? How should the bills be paid?[5] <> I believe that copyrights, trademarks, and patents are important. I also believe that modern laws have perverted these protections beyond all reason.

Comments on Issue #357

Myles Corcoran <> Perhaps the Dublin tram lines do not meet on purpose. Perhaps the businesses in the city center wanted the increased traffic and the city council wanted the tax revenue from the businesses. <> I like dull game mechanics. Game mechanics with too much flavor distract from the roleplaying. <> Of course Grimtooth's Traps were not fair. The whole point of traps is to capture or kill invaders and thieves (aka, adventurers) by using surprise and not giving them a fair chance at detecting or evading them. I agree that Grimtooth's Rube Goldberg-esque traps and the gruesome, horrific deaths and dismemberments were mostly intended for humor and not practical dungeon use.

Lee Gold <> Thank you for your comments to Jim Vassilakos. I had not put my finger on exactly why he was pissing me off, and I think the phrase "to get people to think" and its insulting assumptions is a large part of it.

Spike Y Jones <> Modifying a wand of continual light to create a column of coherent light should not be a game breaker. After all, the laser would only have the same power output as the wand had, which is enough to blind (with a ranged attack roll and a failed saving throw), but not enough to do any physical damage. <> "Legal tender" in Vhallaan is officially limited to those coins minted by the Duke. This does not stop people from using cut coinage when convenient, but such tender is not always trusted (for good reason) unless weighed and measured.

Paul Mason <> Combat rules have such a pull because there is such a need and desire to get it right. Most of us can hand-wave, narrate, and/or roleplay our way through any task a character might attempt, but this approach rarely yields satisfactory results in a fight. We are perfectly happy resolving most tasks with a single die roll, but doing this with combat would just fall flat, unless we add a lot of narrative filler.[6] We want combat to be exhilarating, tactical, and perhaps most importantly, fair. Some games add the same depth we typically reserve for combat and apply it to other elements of the game, such as courtly romance or netrunning. With so much screen time devoted to the specific task, the same desire for getting it right applies. <> I object strongly to your implication that "circles, other shapes, and wavy lines" are not art. I am rather fond of minimalism.

Brian Misiaszek <> One of my players commented on how my campaign a WFRP feel to it. The lack of demi-humans was welcomed by at least one of my players. I think the others were indifferent to their absence.

Jonathan Nichols <> You hit the nail on the head. Corruption is human nature.[7] Everything we touch becomes corrupted, even the (Western) sacred cows of free enterprise and democracy. Both of those institutions lead to destruction if left unchecked (say by sensible regulation, an independent judiciary, and a free press). Yes, the checks can also be corrupted, but without them, we are all surely doomed.

Simon Reeve <> You have made such a fuss over my "European" rabbits. I wonder if you would make such a fuss about a North American scenario featuring horses, cattle, or Caucasians.

Brian Rogers <> Gamescience makes d16s. I have seen them numbered 1-16 and as a doubling die (1, 2, 4, 8, etc.). <> I am well aware of the dangers of TK. However, since balance far down my list of concerns, I refer back to the appropriate source material. <> I think there should be some mechanical method to slow the use of developing power tricks and stunts, but the option to do new, interesting things must be supported. In M&M, a hero point can be used to use a new Stunt or Extra, once per round per point spent. I find this kind of solution preferable to the rigidity of the Hero system[8] (and others). <> Your point about hard line text purists is noted.

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- 1: And not just so I can drive Paul Mason up the wall. :)
 - 2: The researcher was Dr. Diane Swanson of Kansas State University if anyone wants to do any fact checking on their own.
 - 3: The answer to your question is "yes."
 - 4: Ever notice how often I make derogatory comments about gamers? ;)
 - 5: This was a rhetorical question, not one that needs a response. I plan never to address these issues in these pages again.
 - 6: And do we really need rules for that?
 - 7: Or, as I often say, "People suck."
 - 8: Unless things have changed with the new, fifth edition.