

Sinister Things CXVIII

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Last Month...

...I did not manage to get my zine into Lee until the afternoon of the deadline. Unfortunately, the PDF I emailed was not printable by Lee. She was then forced to copy & paste my zine, which naturally messed up the formatting and fonts. An upgrade to OpenOffice 2.0 has fixed the PDF printing problem.

Ignorable Theme: Issue #365

Player Creativity

I love it when players take an active interest in the campaign and welcome almost all creative input. In my current campaign, the majority of input has come from three of my five players, with Gil, whom I mentioned last month, providing the bulk of the historical and geographical details. I maintain the right of veto and so far have only tweaked a few minor things in the player creations. I hope to post the material on my web site, but for now it is hidden on my hard drive or on the Yahoo group I created for the campaign.

Many gamers who can GM often do not because they lack the time. One time, when I was trying to start a campaign and get players to become involved, I was explicitly told by one player, who also GMs, that he did not want to do any work, that he just wanted to show up and play and not have to do anything between sessions. And that is fine too, so long as they bring their creativity to the gaming table each session.

Typically, the single biggest creative investment a player makes is during the character creation process. Some are satisfied with writing out the character race, class, skills, etc. Others add more description. Some go overboard, as I did when I wrote up Ingrid, who appeared a while ago in these pages. And that was short compared to what some players produce.

I have seen some players provide input solely for the purpose of promoting their own character's story and not really helping to build a campaign as a whole. Subplots are great so long as other players do not feel marginalized. One player's input should not straitjacket the GM or the other players. But we all knew that.

Whimsical Fantasy Setting

My current fantasy campaign is fairly grounded. There are no demi-human races. Magic is rare and the PCs' supernatural encounters have been in isolated regions with only themselves to tell the tale.

But sometimes I really long for something more whimsical, a setting where traditional fantasy elements all come together and co-exist. I sometimes call the

type of "everything goes" campaign worlds "kitchen sink" or "gonzo" worlds. And while I usually cringe at how they are handled, they certainly have some appeal. The following are the first steps I took in creating such a setting.¹

The Known World

The Known World rests upon a disk some 8000 miles across (1 mile = 1000 paces). To the west lies the Dragonspyre Mountains. To the south is the Burning Desert. The Frozen North, a rugged land of perpetual ice. To the east is the Open Sea, which covers 1/4 of the World. Other bodies of water, such as Silver Bay and the Sea of Ice bring the total to roughly 1/3 of the World. The Pirate Isles form an arc that demarks the Skull Bay from the Open Sea. The Green River runs roughly northeast from the Forbidden Jungle, between the Mountains and the Desert, into Skull Bay. The Wren River runs roughly southeast into the Silver Bay.

Year-round, the sun rises and sets at nearly the same place on the horizon to the south. In summer, the sun reaches higher in the sky and casts its warmth over a greater area. The difference between the summer and winter path is 1/4 the arc of the sky above (45 degrees).

The moon, Nivar, sometimes called the Midnight Sun, is always full, and follows a similar arc as the sun, but rises and sets 30 times in 29 solar days, so that it is always catching up, or distancing itself from the sun.

The stars follow a fixed path in the sky, centered on the same spot in the northern sky, but lag behind the sun by a day out of every 30. Some claim that crystal sphere of stars is not fixed and that the axis itself rotates, but this is viewed as paranoid fantasy by most.

The World resides inside a crystal sphere at the center of a mechanism in the personal study of one Denis Cartwright, a skilled and respected craftsman from Erinforge, Highwater. Denis created the model as a present for his newborn son, Henrik, who has long since grown and moved away to start a family of his own. That the World can exist within itself or before its own creation is a paradox known or explainable by none except one, and he is not speaking (mainly because he is Denis's Dog, Chester).

The sun and moon are suspended on brass arms over the world and it is all encased in a sphere with thousands of imperfections that make the stars (Denis could not afford to buy a higher quality crystal). That the sun, moon, and stars are not synchronized and that there is seasonal variation in their trajectory across the sky is caused by an imbalance in the mechanism that drives them (Denis's expertise is in carpentry and woodworking, not clock making).

The whole thing rests within a table that Denis can rotate and swivel for better viewing. He can even turn it upside down to view the world on the other side of the disk. That no one falls into the sky when he does this is a Great Mystery. The World on the Other Side was actually his first attempt that had some serious flaws, so he flipped the disk over and did it right the second time on the reverse side. That the Axion Church also believes in a single creator and that This World is the second so created is coincidental (or so we hope).

¹ I have more, but I'm using this as filler.

Multiple

RAE comments on tales of the deeds of NPCs and integrating them into the game.

RAE comments on gunpowder. In fact, I so much like the notion that gunpowder summons and/or irritates elemental salamanders that I incorporated that notion into The Known World. In fact, gunpowder was invented as means to summon/create fire elementals, but it proved so good at it that no one wants to use it.

Michael Cule

Every organization that weathers a restructuring and layoffs experiences the type of panic, denial, and gallows humor you describe. Paranoia is also common.

Lee Gold

Thanks again for taking good care of my zine last month.

Solving Unicorn Trouble by granting the responsibility to the player is a excellent option, assuming the players are willing. I employed the technique in my campaign by giving the player of the knight-in-training (and the most likely to produce such background material), Gil, create the rules and guidelines for tournaments in the game world.

Joshua Kronengold

Interesting points about advancement and starting power in *Weapons of the Gods* (WotG). I am doubtful that "most sources" have advancement that is much faster than rpgs; I always see game advancement as being far faster than what I find in the stories I read.

Due in part to my dislike of font-based smilies, I have taken to making them thusly... :) ... which never gets substituted by a glyph. I do not like noses on smilies, which some see as heresy, but there you have it.

I thought your suggestions for a "normal" hero with time dilation were spot-on. The trick is to use the time effectively for indirect attacks and maneuvers.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

George Carlin had a routing describing the softening of language, using the evolution of the terms used for PTSD, as an example.

I have been meaning to due a review of *Savage Worlds* (I have the revised edition) for nearly a year now. Each attempt is too detailed and verbose. The differences between the editions (I thought you had the first edition) are minor and contained in a PDF on the Great White Games website.

Brian Rogers

Your musings on powers too dangerous to use brought up very good points and it is definitely food for thought. You see the same kind of thing with Batman's batarangs, which are used to cut through rope, but not slice flesh, or lodge into wood or stone, but not a vil-

lain's chest. Powers like flame projection are also used to provide cover fire; rather than hitting the bad guys and causing lethal burns, it simply forces them to duck and hide.

The comic *Gotham Central* (very good, but slated to end its run in February), shows the deaths of several police detectives from Mr. Freeze and the Joker, among others. For the members of the GCPD, supervillains posed a very lethal threat. But then, I would not call the comic four-color.

Rather than try to made a distinction between different powers, such as saying flames are lethal but lightening is not, I am inclined to say all attacks are potentially lethal and very dangerous to use against normals or anyone without adequate protection. This would even apply to super-strength. You then need to encourage players to devise non-lethal alternatives to their primary attacks, such as disarming, entangling, or distracting normal opponents. Against super humans, the gloves can come off, perhaps because of the energies associated with superpowers. That leaves the question of what to do with characters like Batman the Punisher, who presumably have no super human powers. Your Bio-Auras concept works, but any in-game rationale runs the risk of exceeding one's threshold of disbelief.

Many games provide PCs (and important NPCs) with special benefits, such as hero points, to allow them to survive situations that would kill normal folk (unnamed NPCs, mooks, etc.). This can be used for superhero games without having to create an in-game rationale for why the PCs are able to survive lethal attacks.

In my *Savage Worlds* campaign, fire damage has come up several times, not least because the group's sorcerer specializes in fire spells. In SW, fire is no more lethal than other attack. Wounds from fire are healed normally, but should someone incur a true injury from fire, there is opportunity to have the kind of gruesome long-term effects from fire that one would expect. The same applies to bullets, blades, etc.

Marco Subias

When it comes to the lives of US service men & women, political instability within the capital, and continued violence against civilians, mentioning the construction of a new school seems less like "balanced reporting" and more like a fluff peace to distract you for the weight of the greater issues. If you give each story an appropriate weight as it applies to the American public that was duped into war, you will find that the reporting is one-sided and negative not because of irresponsibly or lack of balance but because the war, any war, is pretty damn negative. (Other Iraq comments moved to www.sinisterthings.com)

Jonathan D. Woolley

If we equate a 4-hour gaming session as a single issue for a comic book, you can extrapolate an appropriate advancement rate for superheroes. This may differ depending on the book in question, as Josh's comments about *Weapons of the Gods* illustrates.