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## On Perception Rolls

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In his recent essay, "How to Run Roleplaying Games," Greg Stolze writes, "You play the character's senses. When they enter a scene, you describe it, telling them what they see, hear, smell and otherwise observe." This presents a great challenge since the GM has to decide what the characters notice and what eludes their senses. The traditional solution is to make a Perception Roll.<sup>1</sup> Lots of them.

Whether made by players or by the GM (who even has the option to make rolls in advance), rolls for Perception might outnumber all other skills. Perception is one skill that is useful to every character class, race, or role. Skill points in Perception are rarely wasted. But if the GM relies too heavily upon Perception rolls, they end up being boring. Sure, a key roll at a pivotal moment may add drama, but most end up being nothing more than a repetitive mechanical crutch.

When multiple PCs make Perception rolls at once, odds are that at least one will be successful. For example, if there are six PCs, each with a 20% chance of success, the odds of everyone failing is only 26%. Ultimately, the only thing a group Perception roll accomplishes is perhaps in deciding who rolls best. Otherwise, such rolls can probably be skipped most of the time.

Robin Laws' Gumshoe system (as I understand it) is based upon the premise that a scenario should never hinge on finding a key clue and to prevent the game grinding to a halt for missing that link. In many games, this may come down to a critical Perception roll. But there is no reason to roll if the characters *should* find the clue—skip the roll and get on with the game.

Personally as a GM, I find myself relying upon Perception rolls too often. This also came to light during a recent RuneQuest game in which the GM asked for a bunch of Perception rolls, most of which were failed by the starting PCs. From my perspective, those rolls did not really add anything to the game, for while an author can increase suspense by showing the reader things the protagonists do not know about, this literary device is lost on players who do not know what they are missing. I do not have a "solution" to this "problem" (really just a phenomena), but I had a half-page to fill. ; )

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1 Or equivalent for your favorite system.

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## Comments on Issue #382

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### Hazel Bascombe

The Madness Meters from Unknown Armies include a track for Self that addresses becoming "one of the very things you are trying to stop." Personally, I prefer to leave such things to roleplaying rather than mechanics and hope I have the roleplaying chops to pull it off.

Condolences on real life troubles.

### Ty Beard

The chance of rolling up a "worthless" character in CT is no worse than OD&D (3d6, in order). Personally, I hate random character generation, but accept it as a source of inspiration: "I don't know what to play, so I'll roll some dice."<sup>2</sup>

Environmental protection legislation and regulations did not "cripple the economy" and they won't now. Clean air and water is good for the economy, as are alternative energies, and are worth the capital investment. The technology and business models for solar power are viable today, but it's a long-term investment, not a way to turn a quick buck. Besides, you'll never have someone start a war to preserve access to solar power.

I think the problems associated with cleaning solar panels are less than the disposal of waste from nuclear power plants. I do think that nuclear power is a viable alternative to coal and oil, but I also think that the long-term drawbacks and costs are often ignored by its advocates.

Power companies hate solar because they can't own it in the way they can own and control coal and oil plants, nuclear plants, or even hydroelectric dams. Solar is a safe, distributed, democratic source of power and that scares the powers that be and threatens their pocketbooks.

If your players can "roleplay nearly anything," why is it that they can't roleplay the fear of death without you actually putting their characters' lives at risk?

### Myles Corcoran

I'm in two weekly gaming groups. One features two alternating bi-weekly campaigns (one I'm running) and the other is a sporadic mix of board games and roleplaying.

Yes, America is so screwed up politically that

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2 This is an example of "dice as decision makers," which is a cornerstone of my pet theory on rpgs.

Bill Clinton is labeled as being on the left. Anything that is near the middle (a moderate politician, the media, scientific facts, etc.) is considered left-leaning or left-biased.

### **Lee Gold**

Interesting bit about ravens not being able to break skin. It explains why they go for eyeballs.

In teaching a subject, one has to keep in mind the level of the student. Having a PhD in mathematics may not help in teaching pre-algebra. So, unless you want to have separate skill percentages in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, complex analysis, differential equations, etc., I'd leave the teacher's skill level in the subject matter out of the equation once you establish the teacher knows the subject being taught. In my experience, it's possible to teach a subject you just learned yourself hours before.

I know both my roleplaying style has changed over the past twenty years, including having greater cooperation between players and GMs, and it has nothing to do with "having more rights" in other areas of my life. The same is true of my ever-evolving GMing style.

### **Spike Y Jones**

Congratulations on finding a proper fish n' chips shop. It's actually one of my favorite things to order at restaurants that serve it, but I lack the culinary chops to identify what kind of fish it is.

### **Brian Misiaszek**

I excluded holograms and cybernetics for the simple reason that they did not appear in *Star Trek* or *Forbidden Planet*. Plus, they carry baggage from other sources (such as *ST:TNG*) and the players may make inappropriate assumptions. However, both would be good technologies for aliens, potentially even being a plot device for a particular episode session.

### **Lisa Padol**

I played *Cat* for the first time at Kubacon and enjoyed it. Though "I already know how to play a cat," that reasoning has never prevented me from playing a human.

I found Todd Furler's *Thy Will UA* game far less blasphemous and confrontational than it was billed to be. But then, I decided to handle my character's own crisis of faith internally, rather than create external conflict. I also felt Todd's usual cinematic touches worked against the theme this time, especially when a couple of the players went overboard in that direction.

### **John Redden**

Fascinating lifestyle you have there. I'd be jealous if I wouldn't be so hopeless at it. : )

### **Brian Rogers**

I do think that having a GM's perspective on roleplaying helps curb scene hogging and other disruptive player habits. But then, I've played alongside some GMs who are scene hogs.

Your musings on how to handle extended, dramatic activities seems spot-on to me. While reading it, I thought of ways of adapting similar approaches to *Savage Worlds* and other game systems. The key, which you illustrated, is that the rolls must have meaning and the outcomes must be played out dramatically, else they're just a series of otherwise boring dice rolls.

Thank you very much for the USS Carter write-ups. I appreciate seeing the differences between what you planned and what really happened.

### **Marco Subias**

If you take your argument for businesses being politically neutral and only giving consumers what they want, there must not be any political bias in the very profit-oriented (modern) news and entertainment business.

Personally, I think the media is biased, not to the left or the right, but to getting the highest ratings for the least amount of money. Rather than receive critical news, insightful analysis, and fact-checking, we get Paris Hilton, con artists<sup>3</sup>, and propaganda<sup>4</sup>. The so-called liberal media effectively rolled over on its back and followed the White House into a horribly planned war based on misinformation and wishful thinking (though some would say outright lies and wanton disregard for human life). Instead of investigative journalism, we get punditry, which is not only cheaper, but it hooks more viewers. The business of news has eroded the fourth estate to a toothless lapdog.

I do not really consider *M&M* level-based. The power level is really just a balancing guideline in the same way *Hero* has "The rule of X." *M&M* is more fiddly and precise in some areas (a product of its d20 heritage and its target audience), but the underlying mechanics seem less complex to me than *WT*'s ORE (which always struck me as over-fiddly).

3 Also known as psychics, mediums, conspiracy theorists, and pseudo-scientific fruitcakes.

4 A press release is not a reliable source.