
Ignorable Theme for #384

GMs who improved over the years

I can only write for myself. I have improved my GMing though experience, trial-and-error, noting my limitations and strengths, and never being satisfied with my performance. Every new game is a new opportunity to fail or succeed.

I have more experience and expertise running convention games of 4 to 8 hours rather than long campaigns. If I never run a campaign over 20 sessions long, I can accept that. Just as there is room in this world for long-running serials, miniseries, and movies, there is room for epic campaigns, short campaigns, and one-shots.

Finding a game that matches ones style is critical, I think. When it comes to a bi-weekly campaign, I have found that I often cannot bring myself to write lengthy notes in preparations for games or even sometimes to write down NPC stats or descriptions. This has plagued me for decades of gaming and I doubt I will improve any time soon. So, now I choose not to run game systems that require lots of prep.

Likewise, I dislike crunchy systems or ones in which some “builds” are significantly better than others. If I were to run a *D&D* campaign, I'd have to restrict the game to the “3 core books” and use monsters straight out of the manual. What works best for me are light, traditional systems which allow me to improvise with hardly any effort. Despite my bitching last month, *Truth & Justice* does this well.

The single game that had the biggest influence on my GMing is Amber, though I have never run an Amber game. The tips for running dramatic scenes and making decisions without having to rely on dice are excellent. This is perhaps why I have little patience for game designs that limit my ability to make my own decision by bogging me down with rules. I am sure this is why I have an inherent distrust the ability of dice to pick the best outcome (while respecting their ability at making interesting decisions that might not have occurred to me).

I think I need improvement in the following:

- Combat: making it more tactically interesting and integrating dialog and roleplaying
- NPCs: making them more fully-realized and interesting for the players
- World building: preparing more while integrating better hooks for players to grab onto; plus, this also facilitates better improvisation

My GMing (and roleplaying) abilities are a work in progress. And I hope they always are. Complacency is an enemy to any art or craft.

Miscellany

Scheduling purgatory

There are more headaches on the campaign front. The RuneQuest GM is moving to Sacramento. If he also drops out of my campaign, that will leave me with only 2 players, which is below critical mass. There are also long-term venue issues, due to two people moving and the rest of us with little or no gaming space. So things are up in the air, dammit.

Traveling

Recent travels for work have taken me to Denver (where I am as I write this), Montreal, and Pontyprid (in Wales). I will probably end up going to Britain once more this year, where I usually have at least a day in London to be tourist. It's nice, but I'd rather be home. Though I'll miss GenCon (and meeting up with many of you there), I won't miss the flight. Mid-September, Terri and I are taking an Alaskan cruise, which means flying to Seattle, but I think I'll manage.

Reading

One advantage of plane travel is the ability to catch up on reading. I still have several roleplaying games and supplements which I own, but have never read. I also have a backlog of novels and comics, though I never take the later on trips.

The Serenity RPG, which I recently bought used, is a perfectly serviceable game system which reminded me of Cinematic Unisystem. It uses polyhedral die codes for attributes and skills (which are rolled together to give a total). Characters are further described by assets and flaws. Players have plot points to make up for bad die rolls and other uses. The setting information is a little thin, but I think that is mostly due to the thinness of the source material. Though I have no desire to play canon characters, their write-ups serve as good benchmarks. I especially liked seeing Mal's ability to take a beating. Perhaps too much space is dedicated to equipment, but spaceships are given the room they deserve in a game named after a ship. Overall, I'd recommend it to any Browncoat gamer.

Phelan is a supplement for Ironclaw that describes the very Celt-like wolves (and neighboring clans). It has plenty of system-neutral cultural notes. The new powers for druids, fools, and avatists add welcome local flavor. I wish they had included a regional map; the geography is confusing without one. The included adventure is welcomingly open-ended in many places. I have a fondness for Ironclaw and look forward to reading the other supplements.

Comments on Issue #382

Ty Beard

The two primary reasons I hear in favor of bell curves over linear distributions (d20) are that they are “less random” and that they model reality better. While these statements have some statistical basis, they don’t hold water for me as a reason to use them in rpgs. After all, if you have a 67% chance to succeed at a roll, it doesn’t matter if you are rolling 3d6 or d20, nor does it matter that you are more likely to roll an 11 with 3d6 than a d20.

All else being equal, a small modifier can give someone a significant edge when using a bell curve. Conversely, a small modifier means little if you are under- or over-matched. On 3d6, a +1 means a lot more when you need to roll 11-or-higher than when you need to roll 5 or 15. In contrast, a +1 is always +5% on 1d20.

Also, at the high end, you get a diminishing returns on your bonuses.¹ Bull curves have a nice asymptotic approach to certain success. But as you pointed out, this has the effect of squishing the effective range of usual modifiers.

Though some games may be well served by these effects, there is no reason to assume that the use of bell curves in action resolution² is inherently better than linear distributions. Ultimately, you have to pick the method that best fits the effects you want and generates the outcomes that are most appropriate and beneficial for the game.

I think I suffered typographical whiplash from your font reduction in the comments. You had over a third of a page left over. Could you not squeeze out an extra half-point?

Depending on the task and skill level, one may not be able to become more skilled through failure. Burning a dozen cakes does not make one a better baker. You have to at least not burn one cake to learn from your experience.

The Democratic party is to the left only when seen from the far right. To those of us on the left, it is on the right, closer to the center. Clinton, as you noted, was “the best Republican president in history.” At best, he was centrist. He certainly was not a liberal. The way his administration sold out the left is why I did not vote for Gore in 2000.

Your “liberal friends” may be silent because they simply dislike your approach to political and moral debates (which include what I consider questionable tactics and border on logical fallacies). Or perhaps

they refuse to argue with you for the sake of friendship. But I’ll bite. Women have the moral right to decide what to do with their bodies. Bigotry in any form is morally abhorrent. Where these collide is a quandary. But ultimately, I don’t have the moral authority to tell a woman she can’t abort a fetus because it does not have the gender, eye color, or other genetic marker she wanted. Importantly, I do not have the right to ask her why she wants to terminate—that’s her business. If she wants to advertise her bigotry, I do not have the right to stop her.

Thanks for assuming I am one of those 9/11 conspiracy nut-jobs. You are not winning points here. The lies to which I referred were saying that Saddam Hussein was linked with Al-Qaeda and 9/11, despite any evidence of a link. This lie is still being told (implicitly, if not explicitly) to our troops and to the American public. Bush recently said that “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” was a threat to America. He failed to mention there was no true “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” until we invaded—a lie by omission.

There was a joke around Washington during the pitch for the war: “Of course Saddam has WMDs—we have the receipts.” Of course he did not cooperate with the the UN inspectors. He was a toothless dog straining at this chain. He was no threat, especially after Operation Desert Fox. See also the 9/11 Commission Report.

I was wrong: Bush is not an idiot. He and his team are great campaigners—they can sell anything. Execution is another matter. Going to war in Iraq when the mission in Afghanistan was (and still is) far from over, removing a destabilizing dictator and replacing it with even greater instability, going to war with the “military you have” rather than the military you require, and to entrust rebuilding efforts to amateurs with no credentials other than being “loyal Bushies,”³ was an ill-advised, boneheaded move of global proportions. If “Western liberal democracy and ... capitalism, are cultural constructs,” then invading Iraq as a means of spreading Western-style democracy⁴ was foolish.

Do I think the majority of Iraqis wish Saddam were still in power? No. Certainly not the Kurds or Shiites. Nor, for that matter, Iran or Al-Qaeda.

Nearly 300 words on the stupidity of the War is enough. I’m about done here. I’ve been against the war from before it started. I’m against it now, but I see no way to clean up the mess we made. We can’t leave and we can’t stay. We’re screwed.

Lee Gold

I cannot believe that an otter climbing a rope would have any ill effects on it. Deliberately chewing

1 The same thing happens at the low end when you add more penalties to the roll.

2 As opposed to randomly rolled ability scores, which are a different topic.

3 If I may cross-reference across scandals.

4 One of the post-WMD reasons given for invading.

on it, sure. But climbing? No way.

I doubt my “non-squishy attribute system” would differ much from traditional rpgs and would probably bear resemblances to *Mutants and Masterminds*, *Buffy/Angel*, *Savage Worlds*, and *Castle Falkenstein*.

Peter Hildreth

I too find that three players is critical mass for an rpg, but it's an unstable state. Even four can be troublesome should someone miss a game.

Spike Y Jones

RAE The revised Leprechaun, though the term “solitary” gives me pause. There is a danger that the PC will avoid adventure, preferring to just stay at home and smoke and/or count gold coins, forcing the GM to continuously pull the “pot o' gold” card. More advice is needed to integrate this natural loner into a campaign.

Using “lack of concern for the possibility of civilian casualties” to define terrorism could be interpreted to include US forces (especially when bombing infrastructure and urban targets), if one were so inclined to make the comparison, as our enemies are.

A 2000-student school could actually gain efficiencies of scale while maintaining the same teacher-to-student ratio as a 200-student school. Everything would be bigger: the campus, the library, and administration staff, the janitorial staff, etc., but not 10-times bigger. The teaching faculty could, of course, be 10-times bigger (even bigger). Larger schools could also add specialized classes that smaller schools would not be able to offer with their smaller student pools (unless they created magnet classes drawing from the entire district, as was done for an AP Chemistry class I had as a senior).

Joshua Kronengold

Pet ownership is expensive in my experience. If you take the attitude that by owning a pet, you accept it into your family and provide it all the necessary medical care—even if they do swallow a spool of dental floss or get diabetes.

We were once told by a vet tech that the policy of our clinic (part of a large chain) was to run as many (expensive) tests as possible, milking the owners for as much as possible before taking corrective action. We still use them, because Terri trusts the staff (if not their corporate masters), but we now know to be wary of such tactics.

Why no Prime Directive in *Voyages*? I *want* the PCs to muddle in the affairs of other cultures, especially “primitive” ones.

BSG's spaceships are not silent. The audience can hear the thrusters and guns. I can accept this by believing we are hearing them from the pilots' per-

spective. Firefly is a better example, where the only sounds heard from outside the ship in space was the musical score.⁵

Louis La Mancusa

Just so that I'm clear, is the *Apollo Hoax* “your favorite conspiracy” as an observer or a believer? For example, I always say my favorite holiday is Arbor Day, but I don't actually celebrate it.

Chris Murray

Yes, A&E needs covers. Send them quickly! Oh, and welcome back.

Lisa Padol

RAE the write-ups from *Origins*. I find one-shots much easier to follow than campaign write-ups.

My RQ GM also mentioned how Glorantha was “internally consistent” (or something similar). To get my mind around this, what exactly do you mean? Can you (or anyone who wants to jump in) provide a counter-example and explain the differences?

Pum

I think it safe to say that most games published over the last 20 years either have explicit observation-based abilities or have a means to resolve issues of observation mechanically. But these do not always satisfy; see my zine last month.

Brian Rogers

RAE Musings on Seasonal Beats. Buffy's use of cut scenes showing the Big Bad was a keen observation, though I hesitate using this technique in a game. Not that I don't trust my players, I just don't trust my ability to pull it off well.

I doubt I will ever come back to *Generation Zeta* once this run ends. I am simply not satisfied with my handling of high school drama. If I were to do another supers game with this group, I'd probably do *MnM 2e*, which we have been using for a science fiction campaign (on hiatus to playtest *RuneQuest*) and which everyone owns, rather than subjecting them to a system only I own. Plus, *BESM 3e*, with its hundreds-of-points characters, isn't calling to me.

Marco Subias

Thanks for the ORE explanation. I assume that if you are attempted two tasks with two different attributes, such as intimidating while shooting, you use the dice of the lower one.

I have fond memories of my one-and-only white-water trip on the American River, taken as part of a work-sponsored corporate bonding event. The bonding was lame, but the rafting was great.

⁵ And maybe some dialog, but that doesn't count.