
Ignorable Theme for #385

To what extent should a GM allow players to determine the campaign setting and backstory? As much as the GM and players feel comfortable with. In my Small, Sinister Things campaign, I not only welcomed such input, but I gave out xp for it (a concept I first encountered in Amber). One player, Gil, earned enough to be an advance or two ahead of the others (in Savage Worlds, which I was using, such a discrepancy does not unbalance things in the way that having an extra level or two in D&D would).

How should this be done, and what limits should be put on the players? The easiest method is to allow players to fill in the setting that has not yet been fleshed out by the GM. Give the players a sandbox that does directly overlap with current events in the campaign. This also opens up the possibility of playing in that sandbox later on. In my Small, Sinister Things campaign, I think I had a paragraph of information on the Indok people and their region of the world. Gil filled that out to thousands of words. I requested some tweaks, such as removing references to slavery. Also, he created the campaign map using Campaign Cartographer based on my original rough pencil sketch. Another player, Gordon, added a bunch of great cultural information on the Nishendi, including their d8-based divination system for which he made specialty dice using blank dice and stickers.

Involving players in this way works well for me. My players' ideas help springboard ideas of my own and in the end we ended up with something richer and more interesting than I could have come up by myself. But then, world building is one area where my GMing skills are deficient (as noted last issue). I try to avoid players who cannot separate in-character and out-of-character knowledge. If you fear that your players will have their PCs exploit what they have created, you can always limit their contribution to areas of knowledge appropriate for their PCs. You can also declare that player-generated material is based on what their PCs' know and reality may be different in subtle or dramatic ways.

Problems can arise when a player's vision is incongruous with your own. On one hand, if you do "open up" your campaign world, you have to be willing to bend and be accepting of player ideas. On the other hand, if there is a complete mismatch, you need to hammer out the differences with the player in such a way that both of you feel satisfied with the results. Giving the player a starting point, such as a rough outline of what you want, and letting them fill

in the blanks, will help avoid problems in the future. You definitely do not want to give players free rein and then jerk them back with restrictions because they have stepped on areas you did not want them to. Give them clear boundaries before they start.

Some players will take this as an opportunity to add subplots for their PC. This is good so long as the subplots do not alienate the other players. You want to avoid the frustrated novelist (who come in both player and GM flavors) and not allow such a player to twist the campaign into their own personal story. For such players, giving them a sandbox that they understand is not (yet) linked to the campaign is probably best. But you can still take some sand from the box and sprinkle it into the campaign via NPCs and news from afar.

While it empowers the players and gives them a personal stake and interest in the campaign that goes beyond their own PCs, not all players are interested in "doing work." I was once told by a player that he really just wanted to show up each session and play. Though disappointed, I completely understood and did not fault him for it. Players shouldn't feel obligated to contribute, nor should they be penalized for not contributing beyond their own PC's personal background.

I have never had a player weave established NPCs into their creations. It helped, I'm sure, that we were doing this at the beginning of the campaign before there were any established NPCs. I do not consider all NPCs off-limits; just as I will integrate NPCs created by players, I welcome them to integrate NPCs I created. This is particularly useful when introducing a new player, since they have a link to the other PCs via the NPC. Some NPCs are off-limits, of course; if you want players to leave certain NPCs alone, you need to tell them up front.

Needless to say, it all depends on the players and the nature of the campaign. A short or self-contained game is does not benefit from player input the way an open-ended campaign does. Likewise, a campaign built on mystery, conspiracy, or sense of wonder, would be served best by players peeling the onion as they go, and not make layers of their own. In a superhero game, the players may be encouraged to make (or even running) the allies, dependents, and even arch nemeses (for their own or other PCs), while the GM reserves the right to shake things up and add surprises and retcon events and details.¹

Ultimately, a roleplaying game is a shared creative exercise; there is no reason not to share the setting and backstory.

¹ In superhero games, retcons and breaks in continuity are actually genre conventions!

Miscellany

My Summer Vacation

The Alaskan cruise was not as fun as I had hoped. While we were blessed with clear, sunny skies and the various excursions in the port cities were fun,² the entertainment (and food) on the ship itself was uninspiring. In hindsight, I should have brought more reading material. After 7 days cooped up on this floating hotel with over 2000 other people and no internet access, I was ready to go home.

There were three things I wanted to do on this trip: go to the Space Needle and Science Fiction Museum in Seattle and go whale watching in Alaska. I did all three, though the latter was certainly the best of the three. The former two were interesting, but nothing to write home A&E about.

The highlight of the holiday was accepting a job offer two days into our vacation. I had had my second-round interviews the day before we left. The position is director of product management³ and comes with a bump in title and compensation. Though the amount of travel will be about the same, I should have more discretion and better control than I did before.⁴ I tend to be a creature of habit, so changing employers does not come without a tangible amount of trepidation. But it was fun coming back from a 2-week vacation and giving my 2-week notice.

Comments on Issue #382 #384

Ty Beard

Roleplaying

As you acknowledged to Lisa "great loss" need not mean death. On this, we agree.

I agree about the 90/10 rule as applied to rpg systems. My great frustration with the Fudge community is how they complicate and add sub-systems to a game named for the expression "just fudge it."

"And in a world with games like d20 and GURPS," you can find versions of Traveller in each. Your 1d10-based system looks very reasonable. In general, I like to see skill (training and experience) being more important than attributes, especially for trained skills like navigation and engineering. If you allow Skill-0 attempts, I might cut the attribute in half for determining the modifier (6 → 3 = -2 mod).

If Hercules-class pods have no maneuver drives and are only dropped, why do bulk pods need navigators? And aren't pilots mostly pointless?

2 Though I was really sick of shopping by the end of it all.

3 At Alacritech for those who might ask.

4 It also means my anticipated trip to England this year will not be happening.

Non-Roleplaying⁵

And what of those who cannot afford to pay for pharmaceutical company profits? Is it moral to provide medical care only in proportion to the patient's means? Where does the market yield to ethics?

Democrat is middle of the road from where us "lefties" stand. What's the patronizing term for a right-winger?

You must hate Dan Rather as much as I hate Bill O'Reilly. One of those guys still has a show.

If someone has despicable ideas and acts on those ideas to set despicable policy, fire them. Better yet, don't hire them in the first place.

You can't extrapolate teacher salaries to a full year anymore than you can a part-time employee who isn't allowed to work 40 hours a week.

You mean *government backed* treasury bonds?

However amoral Bill Clinton was, it does not excuse George W Bush's record of evil⁶ and tyranny.⁷

I trust "The Market" as much as you trust "The Government."

Myles Corcoran

I'd say that most of D&D character creation, not just the feats, depend on the style of the GM and group. This is true of any rpg, really.

On Bill Clinton, Molly Ivins wrote, "No one but a fool or a Republican ever took him for a liberal."⁸

Doc Cross

Quack! Sympathies about GenCon. Your sentiments on being out of stride is often how I feel about the rpg hobby as a whole. I have little use for the vast majority of games, mainstream or indie. See you at DunDraCon.

Michael Cule

What advice did you ultimately give the 10-year old GM? Was he GMing for players his age? Which games was he thinking of running? Just curious.

Spike Y Jones

Your warning is noted. Even sources that are biased toward the existence of God reaffirm my atheism. Do (other) biblical scholars inflate population figures by 10, as you have?

I agree about the D&D boxed set. I get the sense, though, that efforts to do something similar in the '90s and '00s were less successful. Are there any sales figures? I've been tempted to buy the 3.5 basic sets just to get the figures and dice.

5 Presented in "rapid fire" form.

6 "Morally wrong or bad" – dictionary.com

7 "Arbitrary or unrestrained exercise of power"

8 From "You Got to Dance With Them What Brung You" via Wikipedia and Salon.com.

Joshua Kronengold

The four class structure of D&D works well right up to the point that they muck it up with new classes and advanced options.

I thought the four colors of *four color comics* were cyan, magenta, yellow and black.

You got me. I keep channeling an argument I had several years ago with an indie fan about the role of social contracts in game design and mechanics. So, when I let off a snarky, anti-indie comment without backing it up with a real life or actual play example, I welcome you to call me on it.

I was leaving the straw man reference as an exercise to the reader.

Louis La Mancusa

There is a fine line between claiming⁹ someone has sociopathic traits and calling them a sociopath. In the future, I suggest not hiding behind semantics.

Why do you devote so much space reprinting other people's copyrighted work? If you want to spread the word, include a link.

For example, I direct you go www.galluppoll.com/content/?ci=28456 which shows the approval rating for Congress going back to 1974. If you compare these numbers with presidential rates (collected at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Approval_rating; I was unable to find a good single-link directly from Gallop), I think that is fair to say Congressional approval almost always lags that of the President. There are many reasons for this, but remember that Congress is a collective body that is designed to work slowly and deliberately, relying on compromise (and mutual back-scratching). Inefficiency is built into the system; it is far easier to issue an executive order than it is to write and pass legislation through two houses of Congress and still get the President to sign it.¹⁰

The President, especially a lame duck, need never compromise. For example, without a veto-proof majority (which the Democrats certainly do not have), Congress has to work with the President. It is far easier for a President display "leadership" by vetoing legislation than it is for Congress to create the legislation in the first place. This is exactly what has happened this year.

Brian Misiaszek

When the working definition of "sociopath" overlaps too much with "self-centered, inconsiderate asshole," I think we need to rethink the definitions. Just as someone can be moody without being bipolar, fearful without being phobic, I think you can have jerks who are not sociopaths.

9 Or repeating another's claim.

10 With or without bogus "signing statements."

Action and adventure stories are the heart of roleplaying gaming. Psychological, political, or introspective stories are much harder to pull off well and are certainly in the minority whether you are talking science fiction, fantasy, or horror.

Your wacky idea sounds like a lot of work. It could work really well for LARP, though.

Lisa Padol

The "Able assistant" example from the octaNe game illustrates my frustration with player-defined, open-ended abilities.

I'm very unhappy with dice right now. Dice and I have been disagreeing on what my characters should or should not be able to do. I certainly don't trust them to decide what my character should be thinking. Dice and I are still on speaking terms, and we still play together, but I have boundaries.

Patrick Riley

Get your comment numbering right, dummy.

Brian Rogers

Inspired by your Musings, I took a few online quizzes¹¹ to determine which Hogwarts school I belonged in. Most indicated Ravenclaw, with a couple Hufflepuff and one Gryffindor.

I certainly do not feel I need to "a unique or uniquely high skill to contribute," but I absolutely cannot stand listening to other players talk about their PC's abilities. It particularly annoys me when players brag about their PC's randomly-generated ability scores.

One of the problems of tech companies is what to do with skilled, senior engineers. I have seen the clashing of the Peter and Dilbert Principles. Too often, they are promoted to management positions which has the effects of robbing the department of a good engineer and making said engineer unhappy. Some lesser engineers would make good managers, but to promote them (and give them a higher pay grade) over better engineers can create resentment and. Good engineers need to feel compensated and appreciated while being allowed to continue doing what makes them happy and productive.

Marco Subias

Local control is all well and good, but there is no guarantee that a specific school will spend their money wisely. However, when a number of schools are controlled by a good district, they all benefit.

To me, ORE's "height & width" with wiggle and hard dice seems fiddly compared to M&M's "d20 plus modifiers" system. If I were to play a non-fiddly alternative to M&M, I'd pick a game like Truth & Justice (or something even simpler and more free form).

11 And we all know how accurate those are! ;)