
DunDraCon & Superheroes

DunDraCon

A miracle happened. It didn't rain. It did rain on Tuesday, but it was a day too late to count.

I ran a Buffy/Angel game on Monday and it went well, though not as well as I had hoped.¹ The PCs were "fully and irredeemably evil" vampires, demons, etc. hired by Wolfram & Hart to get to the bottom of a number of recent killings which included some of their clients. It was set in the current season 8 of Buffy (in the comics), but only referenced the Buffy or Angel crew in passing. The idea came to me when I realized that if my players were going to play antisocial bastards, I might as well start them out that way.

The first and best game I played was based in the Firefly/Serenity universe but using a customized version of Fudge/Fate. The PCs were a crew not unlike those on Serenity. I had a terrible time getting into character—someone who was both "morose and creepifying" and "lives on the edge." Each character had five questions and the answers were provided by other players. In general, I love this kind of thing, except that many of the answers were lacking. When asked to identify an incident where my character's moral compass failed, one of the players said that I didn't bring a sandwich on a mission even though I had been warned. And unfortunately, most of the juicy inter-party relationships and tensions established by the questions/answers were ignored.

We were tasked with tracking down (and getting the bounty for) a fugitive wanted by the Alliance. We also had to deal with a rival bounty hunter and the heavily-armed gang (in the employ of a corrupt local rancher) who had possession of the fugitive. Our scenario was the first of (probably) three in a longer series, which left the ending hanging.

The GM employed a number of cinematic and game-based tricks with mixed success. There were opening and closing vignettes with the players essentially playing NPCs. The events of the scenes, which involved a lost colony ship with scary military hardware, were connected to the overall plot of the adventure(s), explaining why the fugitive was important and what is at stake in the long run, but not directly related to the scenario. In both scenes, I managed to get my characters insta-killed; there were no other casualties. I cannot fault the GM for the idea of the vignettes, but the game would have been fine without them.

1 Which seems to be indicative of the rut I'm in.

Most of the investigation phase was accomplished by rolling dice first, determining success then playing out the scene to gain the piece of information. Players not in the scene were given the task of playing the NPCs, which worked well despite some awkwardness involving what the NPCs did or didn't know, exactly. I liked the technique for two reasons. Though it was a very "narrative" approach, the stages of the investigation were *roleplayed* rather than *narrated*. Plus, it's always good to involve as many players into a scene even when they're PCs aren't around. After we achieved a certain number of successful investigation-related rolls and played out the appropriate scenes, we had the final pieces of the puzzle (the location of the fugitive) and proceeded to the big rescue scene.

For the climax, the players defined what obstacles they might face and the we came up with a plan to deal with them. I didn't feel this added any more to the game than if the GM had simply laid out the opposition ahead of time.

The last trick was in using a real-time mechanism to determine if the mechanic could turn off the generator and shut down the security system. The player was given the task of playing the game Phoenix, which was adjusted in difficulty based on how well the player rolled on the task. In general, I don't like to cross the player/PC divide, but it certainly added to the tension. Plus, my PC was berating him all the time he was doing it, which kept it interesting for me. :)

The other game was D&D. The PCs were faeries, taken from some non-Wizards d20 faerie books. Unfortunately, the GM had never GMed before and it showed. Four of the players were kids 15 and under (as I expected) and they reminded me of why I never play with kids.

The oldest girl was loud, overbearing, and annoying. The only boy didn't distinguish between in-character and out-of-character commentary; though I have seen this same issue with many adult gamers, even the GM noted that his behavior was out of hand. One 14-year old girl was very pleasant to play with. The youngest girl was overwhelmed and disappeared before the end. She had left her dice at the table, and when I later saw her in the kids room, I went back to get the dice and eventually delivered them to her.

We wasted a lot of time in the beginning getting the party together and gathering supplies. This included the GM giving us any and all items, magical or not, we asked for. This was justified in-game because we were on a mission for the Faerie Queen, but it just felt like old-school Monty Hall freebies.

This feeling was also reinforced by the GM giving out xp for in-character and out-of-character actions and comments. I think I got xp for wearing purple, the GM's favorite color.

The scenario itself, once we got to it, was a dungeon crawl that we breezed through. The GM had her friend run the combats, which was a wise decision, because she was clearly not up to the task herself. The encounters were not especially difficult, but that might have been because they were the initial, easy fights at the start of the dungeon. We never got to the tougher fights lower down because we were running out of time. We were rushed to the last room of the dungeon, answered a couple of riddles aided by Intelligence rolls, and escaped with the gem we were sent to retrieve.

Superhero Campaign

At DunDraCon, I decided that I really should challenge my regular players and myself. Given that the modern mystic mystery game would be easy for me to run, that meant I should run the superhero campaign.

I whipped up a set of rules based around Fudge with influences from Spirit of the Century. The skills and mundane abilities (what I am calling Talents) are predefined, but the powers are mostly player-defined with some guidelines about how attack, defensive, and movement powers should behave. As the campaign progresses, I plan on tweaking things and my players understand this.

So far, we've played one session which didn't go so well but that was mostly because I didn't plan things out far enough in advance and the session petered out. Another DunDraCon decision was that I need to practice winging it more, but I don't think that'll be possible with this campaign and these players. In two weeks, I should be better prepared.

Hobby Games: The 100 Best

Editor: James Lowde

Publisher: Green Ronin Publishing

Format: 400 pages, trade paperback

Price: \$24.95

When I tried to buy this book at my local Barnes & Noble, I was told that it was not a title they carried in the store, but that I could order it (or get it from the website). This is a shame as it limits the audience rather than reaching out to people who don't know what "hobby games" are. On the other hand, I don't think non-gamers would get much out of this book.

The book features 100 short essays on 100 different games, including war games, roleplaying games, board games, and a few card games. The

essays are written by 100 different designers who were not allowed to write on games in which they had a creative role or financial stake. Not exactly reviews, each essay makes its case of why its subject should be considered among the 100 best hobby games. Though their arguments may be compelling, the majority of the writing is not. Rarely were the essays entertaining. I often enjoy reading reviews of movies I will never see or games I will never play, but not those found in this book. Many were enlightening, to be sure, but too many of the games, I feel, were picked for their historical and nostalgia factor, rather than being the best of hobby games that people can actually go out and buy today. Frankly, some of the games may not stand up as well today as they do in the writers' memories.

I doubt any gamer would agree with all the essays, but that is to be expected. Since I am mostly a roleplayer, I had never played the war games and heavy board games (with the exception of Battletech), so I cannot comment on the opinions expressed in the essays. For the RPGs, I didn't think that Toon deserved a spot (as I'm sure plenty of people would not have chosen Fluxx, as Bruno Faidutti did). The praise of Vampire: The Masquerade seemed to buy into the mystique and marketing success of the game (which are noteworthy) rather than its merits or lack thereof. Several of the essays give passing reference to a game's flaws, but they lack any real critical analysis as you would expect from a true review.

In the end, *Hobby Games* reads like a dry abstract game plays: interesting but not necessary fun.

X-Ω

Superpower Scaling

The table below provides a physical reference for powers and their effects. The scale does not apply to talents. The scale is designed to answer questions like the following:

- Can I catch and carry that big rig falling off the overpass?
- Can I fire a shot at the villain's escape capsule?
- How big of a crowd can I mesmerize?
- Can I catch up with that ballistic missile before it hits the city?

Superhero comics refer to specific measurements rarely, if at all. This is not a tactical wargame and the focus is on the action and visual effects. The scale provided below is very coarse with very little resolution. For example, the mass increases five-fold for each increase in rank. The fine de-

Rank	Mass/Weight	Distance	Area	Speed
0	Car, Elephant	Across the room	Refrigerator, Closet	Human
1	Backhoe-loader, Bus, Tyrannosaur	Football field	Room	Car
2	Tank, Tractor-Trailer	Down the street	Office Building, Theater	Plane (sub-sonic)
3	Jetliner, Blue Whale, Statue of Liberty	Across the city	City Block, Stadium	Super-sonic
4	Locomotive	Across the county	City	Orbital velocity
5	Capital Dome, Frigate, Saturn V Rocket	Across the region	County	Interplanetary
6	Ballistic Submarine, Jefferson Memorial	Across the continent	Region	Interstellar
7	Aircraft Carrier, Washington Monument	Anywhere in the world	Continent	Intergalactic

tails of distance and mass are rarely important in superhero stories and the GM and players should do their best to guesstimate based on the benchmarks.

In the worlds of superhero comics, there can be a considerable difference between the physical limits of powers. The strongest hero in one comic may be able to lift a cruise ship, but in another, the strongest hero can lift a mountain or move a planet. This might actually be the same hero as written during two different periods. The scale can and should be adjusted to reflect these different realities.

Comments on Issue #390

Ty Beard

I cannot figure out how you got your numbers when calculating the percentage of marginal versus exceptional results while reversing timing/effect. For 2d6, there are only 2 out of 36 ways to roll 8+ and get an exceptional success (rolling a 2, 6 and placing the 2 in the effect die, making it an exceptional (and very slow) result). That's 5.6%, not the 7% you quoted. With a +1 modifier, it jumps to 16.7% (rather than go down to 5%). More importantly, the percentage of successes that are exceptional goes from 13.3% (for a +0) to 28.6% (for +1). Contrary to your findings, I see very plainly that the better you are, the more likely you are to get an exceptional result and the more of your successes will be exceptional.

I did this without applying modifiers to the effect die, of course, because adding +1 (easier task) when lower is better is clearly inappropriate. If anything, we'd *subtract* the positive modifier. But in fact, by reversing the effect table, we can eliminate this little kludge all together.

I agree that it throws combat out of whack since the best effect yields the lowest damage. Where the damage rating says x1, x2, etc., I might just replace

that with 3, 6, etc. and then double the damage for exceptional success and half the damage for marginal success.

Myles Corcoran

Your excellent suggestion the X-Ω karma token rules has been added.

Robert A. Dushay

And let's not forget another one of "our" dictators: Saddam Hussein. Manuel Noriega also comes to mind.

For an action board game alternative to OOTS, I recommend Prophesy, recently released in the U.S. by Z-Man Games. It's very similar to Talisman (run around board, killing things, getting gold, and earning xp), but there are enough tactical and strategic decisions to maintain my interest for 3-4 hours.

Regarding TFT, you say you want to "explore TFT as a meaningful universe where the game conventions are features of reality," yet you are subverting that reality by futzing with magical healing.

Lee Gold

It has been my experience that gamers tend to avoid using skills their PCs are bad at. I don't much see a practical benefit in having a skill rank between X and 0. Besides, those with rank X can simply be "below average" if the player is willing to spend karma tokens to achieve marginal results.

Spike Y Jones

Your employer outsourcing policy means they provide cheaper, shoddier work when they can get away with it. This sounds like a typical corporate thinking and human nature at work.

You're right, the UN inspectors could have missed the (non-existent) WMDs in Iraq. Bush was completely justified in getting thousands of American soldiers killed to verify this fact.

I have heard Muslim scholars claim that the only proper way to read and understand the Koran is in its original Arabic. Others say that the Torah can only be understood in its original Hebrew or even the New Testament in Latin or Greek. Language is a great way to select for fanatics.

Louis La Mancusa

I never accused you of plagiarism.² I accuse you of copyright violation. They aren't my works (images and essays) you are reproducing without permission or authorization, so I have no legal standing to do anything about it. But I can and do suggest that you don't do it. You'll not have to read any more from me on this topic.

Michael Ledeen reviewed³ the book of his "buddy and boss at NRO," Jonah Goldberg, calling it a "fun book" but also says "It's a work of political theory," not a "work of history." Furthermore, he says Goldberg is "bound and determined to put liberals, Socialists, Communists, fascists and Nazis into a common political home." So, you are referring me to a politically partisan work to support your partisan statement? And when did I say anything about "conservative Christians?"

Do you agree or disagree with the following? "...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..."

Brian Misiaszek

My DM removed the succubus from Forge of Fury because he saw it as a incongruous, pointless encounter.

The Dunning-Kruger effect⁴ should be treated as a complication. Not only are they incompetent (rank X), but they act like they aren't (worth a karma token when it makes the game interesting). Thanks for the idea.

Reading Steve Long's forum posts on Hero 6E, I don't get the sense that they'll have an "entirely revised rule-set." I expect the changes to be incremental, like those from the 4th to 5th editions.

Lisa Padol

In X-Ω, I wanted to avoid token bidding wars for fear that they would be too disruptive. I figured a

2 "the unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author **and the representation of them as one's own original work.**" —dictionary.com, emphasis mine.

3 http://pajamasmedia.com/xpress/michaelledeen/2008/01/14/fascism_liberal_and_otherwise.php

4 Which I had to look up, thank you.

pushy player (who will eventually run out of tokens) would be easier to control. I definitely wanted to explicitly forbid tit-for-tat token spending. It definitely needs playtesting with different groups.

Speedsters are made tricky when players and GMs fail to appreciate how speedster abilities are actually portrayed in team comics.⁵ Speedsters don't get ten-times more panels of action than other characters, but what they do in those panels is indicative of their speed. They disarm a room full of mooks, or they make a thousand punches against the bad guy, or they disassemble the villain's escape vehicle, or they evacuate a crowd of bystanders one-by-one. Each of these is a single action in game terms and the player doesn't get any more screen time than anyone else and doesn't have to be given busy work.

RAE your thoughts on OTE. If you do have one character roll 2d6 and another 2d10, you don't have to worry about exploding 6s so long as you also allow exploding 10s. Yes, the 2d6 will explode more often, but it still loses to 2d10 on average. Assuming this is what you want.

One way to treat shapeshifting is to have it be a pool of bonus dice that could be used for fighting, perception, resistance to harsh weather, or anything else that comes up. Someone with a (default) 2D fighting trait and 3D of shapeshifting could roll 5D (best 2) in fights. If the shapeshifter wanted to be a better fighter, s/he should have bought a fighting trait (with the self-imposed limitation that it only applies when using shapeshifting).

Brian Rogers

In my superhero game, I distinguish acrobatics from martial arts by having two traits, Athletics and Fighting, so that I can provide differentiation between Batman and Robin.

Steven D. Warble

Your thoughts on Obama and Clinton reflect my own. I have been surprised that Clinton's past scandals have not resurfaced yet, but once the talk radio right stops bashing McCain, I'm sure they'll refocus on her if she ends up on the Democratic party ticket.

Her latests tactics of attacking Obama while praising McCain is not only destructive to her party but her own chances of winning the national election should she get the nomination. Her use of fear tactics is not only reprehensible, but exactly the wrong prescription for this country which has been blinded by fear for over six years now.

5 How characters are portrayed in their own solo comics can be vastly different than in team comics. Similarly, the play dynamics of a solo game are very different than when a group of players get together.