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Game Mechanics

A Huh Moment

I was playing around with dice probabilities, as I often do, and I was looking at a binary dice pool. This is the same as flipping a number of coins with each "heads" counted as a success.

So, I worked out the number of successes for 1 to 10 coins and discovered that the probability of N+1 coins getting more heads than N coins is exactly 50%, regardless of N. This came from calculations, rather than a rigorous algebraic proof, however. The odds of N coins getting more heads than N+1 coins does vary, with the odds of a tie decreasing as N gets larger.

If you change the ratio of heads to tails, such as 3:7 (1-3 on a d10 is a success), then the N+1 vs. N odds change as a function of N, but not my much.

Rules Kudzu

There is an interesting¹ balance in roleplaying game design. On one hand, you want to provide definition and structure to the game. On the other, you want to give players (and GMs, of course) freedom to do whatever they want. On one end, you essentially have an adventure board game; on the other, there's complete freeform roleplaying. All rpgs fall somewhere in the middle of these extremes. As for my own preferences, I gravitate toward systems that "leave it up to the players," except that I don't like player-defined character traits.

One element of *Mutants & Masterminds* that I both like and dislike are its definitions for conditions such as bruised, injured, blinded, and entangled. To give two examples, the definition of dazed is "A dazed character can take no actions, but retains dodge bonus to Defense." While the entry for stunned says, "The character loses any dodge bonus to Defense, takes a -2 modifier to Defense, and cannot take actions other than reactions."² The definitions themselves are mostly logical and can help bring clarity to the game (once you memorize them). But there sure are a lot of them: 33 in the 2nd Edition rules.

With this many conditions, I start to question if it is needless complexity. Do I really need to distinguish between stunned and dazed? Bruised and injured?³ Or it is a case that the multitude of rules is just formalizing all the different things that actually come up in play? A rules-light game would leave things fuzzy and undefined, which means the GM has to make numerous judgment calls. An organized GM would then write them down for consistency. If we did this for a game like *Over the Edge*, would we end up with a similar list?

1 And by *interesting*, I mean frustrating as hell for the designer who can't decide which way is best.

2 And these were two of the shorter definitions.

3 The former applies to nonlethal attacks, the latter to lethal damage.

I see this too in some of the character action options. Looking at M&M again, you can use the Intimidate skill (or Bluff, with the Taunt feat) to demoralize an opponent, which leaves them dazed for a round. Since dazed as a very definite meaning within the system, there is a direct correlation between the player's selected action and the in-game outcome. Without the definition, there would be more hand-waving, inconsistencies, and disagreements in describing the effect of an Intimidation. Despite my aversion to lots of rules, I can appreciate the need for a neutral, static, agreed-upon reference.

Thus, I contend that rules-light games are not as light on rules as they may seem. The primary difference is that the rules come emergent during play and aren't written down ahead of time the way they are in games with thicker rule books.

Explicitly calling out the character options makes the rules heavier, but they can also provide inspiration. If you didn't know that you could use Bluff + Taunt to daze an opponent, would you have picked that option? In a rules-light game, would you have thought to try to daze an opponent with a taunt and would the GM have allowed it? One of the great challenges with rules-light games is in deciding what is or isn't appropriate, and if something is permissible, what the exact effects are. This is why I draw the line at player-defined traits. They cause more headache for me as GM than I care to deal with, but I certainly understand their appeal, especially when designing characters (including NPCs).

All this comes to mind as I work on a rewrite of my homebrew superhero game system. How much do I leave undefined in the game system? How many different options and variables will I explicitly account for and how much will I leave to GM judgment? Whether designing a game system or setting, I always struggle choosing which direction to go, since I can see the validity and value in both paths.⁴

Comments on Issue #400

I was heartened by the thickness of this issue. I really enjoyed the alumni submissions and hope at least some of you decide to stick around for a while longer.

Myles Corcoran

Since I run a lot of one-shot convention games, there is an inherent "ticking clock" to get to the end of the scenario, but time is still fluid and managed by the GM. As I did with *Against the Night Things*, the GM can skip over encounters should the PCs fall behind. The only time I synchronized game-events with the real-world clock was in *Welcome to Sumnerville*. There, the PCs flip-flopped realities at predetermined intervals, so they learned to get as much accomplished as they could before my watch alarm⁵ went off again.

Michael Cule

LOL at "who among us hasn't their little quirks?"

Like the solar system(s) in *Firefly*, the demon mytho-

4 And that's assuming there are only *two* directions.

5 Which the players came to dread.

logy in Buffy/Angel defied logic and it's best not to think about it too much.

Robert A. Dushay

I feel the same way about non-profit hospitals as you do. I would feel better about efforts to privatize education if it too were non-profit. I believe that operating a service for the public trust is incompatible with operating a service for profit. You can't serve two masters; one will inevitably suffer for the other.

Lee Gold

In his UA game Thy Will, Todd Furler described the extreme shock experienced by a recently-fallen angel who could no longer hear the celestial choir.

What do monks love more than food, sleep, etc.? To some, the point of asceticism is to remove all desire. For them, the answer is both "nothing" and "enlightenment," which can be viewed as the same thing.

I hope people give Obama his whole term to fix the economy. I fear the pressure to get it fixed in six months will be too strong and lead to poor decisions and rash action by Congress, the President, and the Federal Reserve. Of course, everyone's opinion differs on what is sound policy and what isn't.

Spike Y Jones

RAE France in the World of Wild Cards. What you wrote rings true to my understanding of the Wild Card universe and contemporary French politics.

Those wacky Canadians. And what happened when some pundits pointed to Canada as an example of universal health care? How well did that go over? In the US, I think Canada is seen as Europe-lite. In Europe, is it seen as America-lite? :)

I'm a bit surprised that publishers don't demand manuscripts in plain text with the occasional markup for *bold* or *italic* so that the layout and design person has an easier time of it.

Joshua Kronengold

Whenever I ran OTE, it tended to end up as farce. This was not a function of the system, but the inherent absurdity of the Al Amarja setting.

Kevin Mantle

I was boggled at the White Dwarf review written by the floor plans' designer. This happens occasionally on RPGnet under the guise of a "self-review." I've also seen designers review and rate their own games on BGG. I find the practice abhorrent.

Paul Mason

I agree with you that the "chaotic, unpredictable nature" is the artistic "point" of roleplaying. That spontaneous, unscripted element is akin to improvisational theater. I think this is why I don't like games which try to map out a scene or define a conflict before it happens.

Although you are not buying RPGs, have you seen (or have comments on) Qin: the Warring States?

Brian Misiaszek

RAE Age of Menace #1. Unfortunately, my first zine (Chaos Dolphin Dreams #1), if it exists still on disk, would be on a 5.25" floppy for an Apple][e computer. :\

Lisa Padol

Not being able to run any plot also happens with the classic loner, who won't engage with the other PCs or the plots, perhaps in favor of their own. In a PBeM, this means they can in their on solo game, but it sucks for FtF games.

RAE Summoning the Maelstrom. I often feel that too much goes on during a typical game day. This is also my problem with D&D-like character advancement: a PC can gain 7 levels in the course of a game week.

Brian Rogers

RAE Musing: Turtling. I would add introversion or lack of ambition as a cause of turtling, which may be subsets of confusion. This is why I don't play free-form or political games. If left to their own devices, without a clear call to action, my PCs will go about their daily, mundane business. I rebel against the PC cliché of troublemaker for the sake of making trouble. I don't write fiction because I'm terrible at creating plots. That's why I have a GM.

In the DC Heroes campaign, we turtled out of fear, as you detailed. But to counter this, the GM didn't give us any time to rest and kept throwing plots at us. Unable to distinguish between the emergencies and those that could wait, we were in the middle of the maelstrom (as noted by Lisa) until I pointed this out to the GM. And while I don't always want to role-play the mundane, non-heroic activities, its needed to help develop the character.

I guess what I'm saying is that a little turtling and non-plot-related roleplaying is a good thing. But too much can lead nowhere fast.

You make a good point that the fictional game world is not the real world and follows its own rules.⁶ Even so, some of the fun of rpgs can be in not doing the expected thing (so long as it isn't overdone to the point that you are no longer playing in the specified genre).

Jim Vassilakos

A cubic parsec is a huge area, requiring jump drives just to get from one end to the other (in a reasonable amount of time). If you're looking for anything besides a star, you're probably SOL.⁷ Near the galactic center, "the stellar densities rise to several hundreds of thousands of stars per cubic parsec."⁸ But in our neck of the galaxy, the density is about one star per cubic parsec. This means, for every binary system (and there are more binary systems than otherwise), there's a cubic parsec without a star and without a good source of hydrogen.

6 One mechanical example of this is when I noted in X-Ω that the difficulty should be scaled based on the genre.

7 Not to be confused with sol.

8 <http://abyss.uoregon.edu/~js/ast222/lectures/lec19.html>