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(Near) Total Party Kill

They had been passing through the village on their way to a lost temple, guided by a young cloistered monk, Llasa, who had had a vision of the temple. This was supposed to be an interstitial adventure following Shane Lacy Hensley's *Dungeon Crawl* adventure. Instead, I killed three of the four PCs.

They should have known better. They had survived the haunted mansion, though not discovered its ultimate secret. They were down in bennies, which only refresh per game session. They knew the brigands had been alerted and would be ready for them. And yet, they decided to take them on anyway.

In playing the NPC brigands, I decided to play them as typical PCs: ruthless and without regard to human life. During the melee, the PCs' spellcaster wounded the brigand spellcaster, who retreated and didn't return. Unfortunately, one of the PCs fell, but they did manage to entangle two of the NPCs. While (temporarily) helpless, one of the PCs, a thrill-junkie alchemist played by Andrew, slit the throat of the leader, using the "you can automatically kill a helpless foe" rule. Man, he was pissed when the two remaining brigands were able to knock his and another PC unconscious and then promptly slit their throats. The remaining PC, how had been casting spells well away from the melee, ran away.

Though the other players were disappointed at having their characters die, and I was even commended for not "wussing out," Andrew quit the campaign. And while I agree with his comment that "I chose to kill the PCs," I still don't think he understand why I made that decision or why it wasn't necessarily a bad one. Not killing them in cold blood was an option. He admitted to their tactical mistakes in dealing with the brigands, but hoisted all the blame for the PC death on my "screwing the pooch."

After an exchange of group emails and a follow-up discussion following the D&D game that he runs, Andrew agreed to a "reset" that would keep the PCs alive and continue the campaign. To be fair to Becky, whose character died in the middle of combat, I decided to redo the scenario. I told everyone that their characters weren't dead, but I wouldn't tell them how or why. Only that it would make complete sense based on events that had already happened in the campaign.

The next session, Llasa woke with a horrific scream. In utter panic, he frantically woke everyone and made sure they were fine. After they calmed him down, he explained the events of his dream (which matched the last session).

Armed with this information, and after they determined the validity of Llasa's vision, they easily thwarted the brigands. It also helped that I nerfed them by only having the leader be a Wild Card. They separated him from the others and ganged up on him before taking on the others. In addition to the leader,

they killed two more and captured the fourth when he surrendered.

Leading up to this (N)TPK, I had been throwing some pretty tough monsters their way. Each time, they managed to prevail from a single blow, late in the combat, when all hope seem lost. Unbeknown to me at the time, Andrew had already been becoming disgruntled. I think everyone forgot what I had written in the Introduction to the campaign:

PC death (and other bad things happening to them) is a definite possibility. However, this does not mean that the GM will be gunning for the PCs. Rather, the PCs (and their players) will have to determine when (or how) a battle can be won and when retreat is the better option. If an encounter seems too tough, it may be because it was designed that way, the dice are just not going the players' way, and/or the GM underestimated the threat level. The GM will not fudge dice in favor of the players or against them.

Tomorrow, the 21st, I hope to wrap up this adventure, as they still have to find the treasure in the haunted mansion. We have a short, 4-hour session because of scheduling problems, and I hope to put this entire episode behind us.

Otherwise, the campaign is going pretty well. The players are looking ahead for what Edges and such to add to their characters. And I still have ideas for scenarios, even if I am borrowing some, such as the temple they are headed to, from my previous campaign. I think I am going to throw some softball encounters at them just to give them a break from any heavy grind they probably had been feeling. But they are just now trying to use the tactical options build into the system and I don't want them backsliding into sloppy planning.

Having a do-over means we don't have to start with new PCs and we can maintain continuity. But I'm not doing it again.

Ignorable Theme for Issue #402

Yeah, I know I'm late.

Player Goals

I like playing make-believe. I had been doing it long before I got into rpgs. I can't play the same make-believe games at 38 as I did when I was 3 or 8, but I still like acting like someone else, getting into their head, and putting words into their mouths. For me, creating and immersing myself in a character is what it is all about.

Telling a good story in which my characters do interesting things is important, but I do not want to "tell a story." If I wanted to do that, I'd write more fiction.

Often times, I want my characters to succeed, but sometimes I want them to fail. It's that "doing interesting things," element again. Sometimes failure is the most interesting thing. I believe in character development, not to mean improvement or expansion, but development as a photograph does, revealing that which was unknown before.

But I think I've said all this before.

Comments on Issue #402

Myles Corcoran

If you distill all player-defined stats into Fighting, Talking, etc., then the stats aren't player-*defined*, just player-*named*. In UA, you can call your Struggle skill anything you want, but it's still the same skill. In general, I am fine with this approach because the name is just chrome. However, it does get silly if, for example, you have 65% in "Kick Your Ass," and keep rolling over your skill and fail to kick anyone's ass.

In OTE, you can have one character with Ninja 4D and another with Martial Artist 4D. If they fight, do they both use 4D? What if they're sneaking? Or making a smoke bomb? How do we handle the seeming disparity between these two traits?

The player(s) and GM may have different assumptions regarding what player-defined traits cover. So you have to negotiate what the player-defined trait actually does. You can break it down into pre-defined categories (Fighting, Talking, etc.), but why not just use the categories from the start? And is the GM astute enough to identify potential problems before they flare up in the middle of a game session?

LOL at your horses as vehicles anecdote.

Robert A. Dushay

How long does stating out tech in Burning Empires take? I have this horrible vision of stopping the game to work out the mechanics. If they are complex as Hero or GURPS vehicle rules, this would be a very bad thing. Something on the order of Fudge or Everway would be manageable.

I have a nightmare of my players saying, "Before I leave the ship, I grab my biocomp... and my transport module, phaser, fusion grenades, terraform kit, ..." just so that they can say it was in the scene if they need it. And they'd do it *every god damn time* if the game mechanics forced them to.

Lee Gold

I can imagine plenty of conflicts in a world united by a One True religion. Messiah or not, I cannot imagine a world that includes humans but does not contain lust, greed, love, anger, and ambition.

Spike Y Jones

I take pleasure in describing places where things used to be. I took it from a stand-up comedian who joked it was how old men give directions. "Just turn a left where Old Johnson's place used to be, and then right where they had that fire."

I completely get your point about discussing game mechanics. Many of the issues have been brought up before and it would seem like there isn't anything to talk about. However, recent comments about player-defined traits, how to handle Shapeshifting in OTE, the 4th edition D&D builds, and others demonstrate that there is still something to talk about when it comes to system. Did you come to a decision about the True20 system based on the d20 to True 20 conversion project you were working on?

Lisa Padol

I consider OTE as having player-defined traits. See my comments to Myles.

Brian Rogers

RAE The Doc Toltec Story. The evolving nature of Nurse Betty comics really rang true. Kudos to James.

I hope you complete the sentence about Phoenix and her similarity to Marvel's Thor.

I don't believe that superheroes lose the first fight because they hold back their big guns. What I mostly see is that the first fight is a learning experience and they come back prepared and ready. In some cases, they need the first fight to figure out what guns to bring to the second fight. In a game, players will only save their big guns for later if there is a reason not to use them earlier in the fight.

The tale of your Marvel PBEM GM who never gave you guys a rest sounds very similar to my DC Heroes GM. He kept throwing so many plots at us that we never had any downtime.

Heath Row

I think that most Westerns are based on American myths, tall tales, and legendary figures. The Wild West, as it is typically imagined, never truly existed except for a brief window of time in specific locales.

The "developmental conversations" my friends and I had while playing D&D and other rpgs in our formative years were mostly off-color jokes and comments.

Marco Subias

My wife and I used to fill out "win a free round of miniature golf" forms for our cat Zippy to see what mailing lists she got on.

Steven D Warble

I don't play a lot of D&D, but I've been told by those who do that fighters were not "the ones that did the most damage" in D&D 3E. Even though they might have hit more often (and this becomes a non-issue at higher levels) they were beat out by rogues, warlocks, and the so-called "strikers" in total damage delivered. I'm not saying this a good thing, though.

In Savage Worlds, GMs can use one of their limited bennies to have an NPC villain soak the damage delivered by the PCs, effectively negating the attack. Astute players try to force GMs to use their bennies. If GMs have too many bennies, it can certainly make playing more frustrating. One way to rectify this is to say that every villain point spent by the GM becomes a hero point that the player(s) can use later.