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Formatting Tweaks

The DejaVu fonts I had been using would occasionally cause havoc with OpenOffice, so I switched to Bitstream, even though I don't think they look as nice, at least on my screen.

Also, my zines are being shrunk when they appear in A&E. I think it has to do with the print setting in Acrobat on Lee's computer. I've increased my outer margins to the proper spec to see if that helps.

Ignorable Theme for Issue #404

Scenario Scenes

Whether playing or GMing, one scene that seems to pop up often is the Mexican standoff (or something similar). This can happen between PCs and NPCs, but PC vs. PC is not uncommon. In the movies, this is a scene of great tension. In RPGs, it tends to fall flat, at least in my experience. In particular, it gets dragged out too long and the drama dries up.

Part of the problem is that players and GMs insist on talking. The iconic visual of a standoff is just that—visual. Subtle changes in facial expression and stance speak volumes. If the actors do speak, their lines are usually terse and poignant. Gamers, not so much. And it's worse if they throw out a famous movie quote. Add to this the tendency of many players to try to talk their way out of everything, and you end up with scene that's not so much tense and dramatic as talky.

Mechanically, the scene is relatively easy to resolve once the violence starts. And here is where many systems simply fail. "How could I have missed?!" players may cry if the dice decide that even though they shot first and have been aiming for a minute, they missed. Granted, it happens and misses may actually be realistic, but they can be frustrating and anti-climatic. But the randomness of a die roll (or card draw or whatever) helps bring the tension back to the scene that was lost from too much talking.

Other common scenes that are often completely devoid of drama (or comedy): shopping, planning (especially if the players have incomplete information), divvying loot, end-of-fight healing, and meeting for the first time (such as in a tavern).

Bells & Whistles

Over on RPG.net,¹ someone commented, "I do like a game to have some kind of bells and whistles to it." A reviewer of the new Song of Fire and Ice RPG from Green Ronin complained that the system was "bog standard."

I read this on the same morning I was thinking about D&D 4e. I've had this idea slowly brewing in my brain to make a stripped down version that abstracts the various attack forms. In other words, I want to remove all the bells & whistles.

I like minimalism, whether in visual art, interior design, or games. Not only do I not need bells & whistles, they actually turn me off. With rpgs, there is already inherent complexity in the characters, plots, and settings. To me, adding extra mechanical bits is overkill.

Games which epitomize my design aesthetic, at least as far as systems go, include Castle Falkenstein, Amber, and Everway. It occurs to me that they are all "diceless," though it takes about 3.7 seconds to add dice to CF or Everway.

Game mechanics are there to support a particular type of play. If you want miniatures-based battle tactics, collaborative storytelling, or internal character conflict, then you add rules for those activities. In my mind, you don't necessarily *need* rules when good roleplaying should suffice, but I understand why game designs put the rules there.

Most gamers seem to want physical conflict, so the combat section tends to take up a large portion of the rules in most rpgs. But I think the highest word count is found in the character creation options. These can be races, classes, special abilities, or equipment. These options fill countless supplements (which are then republished when the base game gets a new edition). There is little doubt, at least in my mind, that gamers *love* these bells and whistles.

In the past few years, there has been a fad of "retro" rpgs which attempt to either copy or recapture the look and feel of classic rpgs, often OD&D. Some attempt to strip down the rules and tropes of fantasy gaming to their essentials. Others attempt to emulate the baroque rule, graphic styling, and all the rusted and cracked bells and whistles, but fail, in my opinion, to add anything constructive. Sure, as a nostalgic exercise for the writer, it was probably a fun project, but I don't see the point of actually playing these retro-clones instead of the original game (unless you simply can't find your books).

Comments on Issue #403

Myles Corcoran

I think what people want from virtual reality is the ability to do things they can't in actual reality. This can include special powers, anonymous sex, a new body, or simply take on a new persona. It is not an inferior copy so long as it doesn't try to copy reality but rather create a brand new reality.

Robert Dushay

I submit that the obsessions of magic-wielding PCs in UA are not truly debilitating. Either the GM works the plot around the obsessions, so that the PCs can get magical charges, or their debilitating nature is glossed over for the sake of the plot.

Lee Gold

To me, roleplaying my PC going insane would not be boring and I would not want additional abilities to compensate. Over time, it might get boring, especially if the insanity does not pose any roleplaying challenges, but that is true of sane PCs as well.

Fatigue in Savage Worlds is very easy. A PC is fine, Fatigued (-1 to all actions), Exhausted (-2), or Inca-

1 <http://forum.rpg.net/showpost.php?p=10242055&postcount=3>

pacitated. The fatigue goes away when appropriate, such as eating/drinking, sleeping, getting out of the heat or cold, etc., based on what caused the fatigue.

It's news that people get emotionally and intellectually fatigued? It's good and proper to nail down facts scientifically, but this particular case seems to fall under the headline of "duh!"

I want to run games (for now) with no paranormal abilities, but the PCs can believe whatever they want. Just like the real world. Whether or not the *players* know there are no paranormal abilities is another question. There are pros and cons either way.

Spike Y Jones

I have not seen designers trash their own games on BGG, but I can't say negative self-reviews don't exist.

In your AD&D campaigns, how easy was it for PCs to find people to train them? How did the party deal with the different rates of advancement?²

Joshua Kronengold

When reading a science fiction or fantasy novel, I assume that the language of the setting is being translated into the reader's language. Converting the units of time and other measurements to a system the reader can understand is a natural next step. However, using modern, Gregorian-based months for someplace other than Earth doesn't work for me.

I see the difference between MnM and OTE as one of precision. In OTE, characters are painted with a very broad brush so it makes sense that modifiers and conditions are treated the same way. MnM is much more specific in what characters can do and how modifiers are applied. Leaving it for players & GMs to build those bits is fine, but it means the rules get added in play. There are advantages to this approach, but there is something to be said for a game designer who takes the time to work it all out ahead of time.

Lisa Padol

You will find no greater (if passive and not particularly vocal) fan of animation than I, especially when it comes to superhero stories. Give me *The Incredibles* over *The Dark Knight* any day. Hell, give me *Batman: The Animated Series*. Give me *X-Men: Evolution* over any of the three *X-Men* movies.

This is not to say, of course, that there haven't been bad animated superhero movies (or tv shows) or that there haven't been good superhero movies, but I truly believe that animation is tragically underrepresented in Hollywood and superheroes translate better in animation than live action. But then, I also prefer traditional 2-D "cell" animation³ to the 3-D computer rendering that dominates popular animated films today.

With *Watchmen*, I am of two minds. On one hand, using live action to portray everyone but Dr. Manhattan resonates with the theme of what it means to be hu-

man and what kinds of people become vigilantes. On the other hand, the costumes, wire-work, and poor likenesses of real-world people (Nixon, etc.) distracted and detracted from the story in a way that the stylized nature of animation avoids. At least for me.

I usually refuse to play myself in a game, especially one in which I will be faced with stress-inducing events. No one wants to see me roleplay a nervous breakdown. And I could do a really good⁴ job at it, I think. Maybe this is why I don't like what happens when you fail a stress check in UA⁵: it robs that juicy roleplaying opportunity away from me. See also my comment to Lee about playing an insane character.

John Redden

Or you could spend 5 seconds to select "Save As...". I send in my zines as PDF so that I don't have to worry about weird formatting changes going from OpenOffice to Word,⁶ and from my printer to Lee's, since Word seems to alter the page layout based on the printer driver. These changes tend to be subtle, but they can also completely throw off column and page breaks.

Entropy in the universe is evil? I'm hoping to see religious protests against the Second Law of Thermodynamics that is ruining this great nation.

Brian Rogers

My wife, Terri, is a personal trainer at the YMCA. A one-hour PT session is about the same price as the monthly membership fee. The Y also has many free group classes and lacks the sales pressure of many for-profit gyms. They recently instituted a program by which laid-off members could get a 6-month waiver on their monthly fee with another 6-month extension if they had not yet found employment.

Jerry Stratten

I'm trying to figure out how your encumbrance system is a *simplification* to the carrying capacity rules. Did you go through the entire equipment list and assigned a bulk value to each item?

Jim Vassilakos

Suppose you walk into a room and find your uncle going off on some rant.⁷ He may mention your name or even address you directly. If you think he's full of shit, do tell him so? Or do you shake your head, walk away, and risk that your silence is interpreted as tacit acceptance or agreement?

Steven D Warble

As a fan of the George R. R. Martin books, I have been wanting to get The Song of Fire and Ice RPG, but I can't think of a plot for a campaign. I'll definitely pick it up if I'm playing in a campaign, though.

4 By "good," I mean disturbing for the other players.

5 At least how Todd Furler runs it.

6 My resume was one recent victim of this conversion.

7 Such as complaining that everyone is being mean and unfair to your argumentative cousin.

2 "We lost our thief for another 6 weeks of training..."

3 Most of which is done on computers today and not drawn by hand, but you get my meaning.