

A hectic work schedule combined with illness and allergies and prevented me from getting this out in time for last month's deadline.

## Century

Around my 40<sup>th</sup> zine, I decided to start keeping track of the number. I started the numbering at 40, but I could be off by a few. So now I am at #100 and I feel obliged to do a (re)introduction of sorts.

### How it all started

I was first introduced to A&E by Doc Cross and Mark Denman at DunDraCon. My first issue as a reader was #199 and I started contributing very soon thereafter. As I mentioned recently to Peter Hildreth, I cannot lurk silently, so here I am.

### Vital stats

I am a 33 year-old liberal, skeptic, atheist, introvert, and roleplayer. I am also very cynical and sarcastic with a healthy misanthropic streak. But I'm really a nice guy, honestly. :)

Born and raised in San Jose, California, I went to school at UC San Diego, got my masters at UC Davis, and moved back to the bay area. I have an MS in physics but I am currently a product manager (marketing) for telecommunications test equipment<sup>1</sup> and have forgotten the vast majority of what I learned in school, much to my embarrassment. Use it or lose it, they say.

I met my wife Terri online nearly 9 years ago; this April will be our 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary. She is from Louisville, Kentucky and moved out to California to be with me. Maybe someday I will return the favor. I have one step-daughter who will be 19 by the time you read this, but she moved out last year, so we are now a two cat (Rufus and Beau), two person household.

### On roleplaying

I have been playing rpgs since 1980, but have been roleplaying even longer than that when you include the countless games of make-believe that I played before then. Roleplaying is something children do without rules, without a lexicon of intellectualized jargon, and without being told the right way to do it. I have also seen adults with no rpg experience jump into murder-mystery type LARPS with great confidence and ability. Where has that purity gone?

### I am a fraud

During a recent Call of Cthulhu game, I was completely unable to make an effective investigation, ask probing questions, or otherwise be useful. And yet, this is exactly what I ask of the PCs in my games, such as my current Angel campaign. What right do I have asking the players to do what I cannot?

I am an introvert who does not like chit chatting or asking personal questions. And yet, I constantly play characters who need these skills, such as for investigations. While many introverted actors are play extroverts, I think improvising involves a different set of skills than working from a script. If I could pretend to be an extrovert, I would be doing it in real life as well as inside the game.

### Five percent

In a recent interview regarding GenCon SoCal<sup>2</sup>, Peter Adkison said "The rule is not every video gamer plays core games, but 95% of gamers play video games." I am in the remaining 5%. The last video game I played was a cute shareware puzzle game called Zen Puzzle Garden. I suck at action games and so-called computer "rpgs" leave me cold.

### Favorite Systems

I do not have a favorite system, but I have fondness for Amber, Call of Cthulhu (CoC), Big Eyes, Small Mouth (BESM), and Castle Falkenstein. All these systems have their flaws, but I maintain affection for them anyway. Oddly, while I like BESM, I do not like Tri-Stat dX so much.

### Current Roleplaying

I am currently running an Angel campaign, which is the most GMing I have done in a long time outside of conventions. Since each session is a single episode with a single case, it is not unlike running a series of connected one-shots, which seems to fit my style well. My two players, Gil and Jeanine, are married and we play at their apartment every 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday. Gil is also the GM for the bi-weekly, Friday night Beyond the Mountains of Madness CoC campaign.

I will be running a Fudge Bunnies & Burrows game at DunDraCon. By the time you read this, DunDraCon will be over, but I have a business trip immediately afterward, so a con report will have to wait until next month.

I am also currently fiddling with the idea of a BESM fantasy game using Uresia and other BESM fantasy supplements. Reviews may be appearing in the next month or so.

1 Mostly optical protocols like SONET/SDH, 1 and 10 Gigabit Ethernet, etc.

2 I cannot remember hearing anyone in California refer to Southern California as "SoCal."

**"It's just a game"**

Oh, how I loathe this expression. It is most often used as a defense to excuse deliberately stupid, silly, or slothful behavior. While it is possible to take games seriously, it is also possible to not take them seriously enough. "It's just a game" is not an excuse not to try your best and not to be frustrated when you know you or others could have done better.

**Character advancement**

Why are so many gamers so hung up on making their characters better by improving their abilities, skills, levels, etc.? I know this is an artifact from campaign-based war games, D&D, and the computer games that followed, but why are so many gamers still fixated on it?

I am not completely against the concept of characters expanding and adding to their abilities, but when you look at the time it takes for characters to advance in games like D&D, the situation is rather ridiculous. Characters can easily reach ludicrous levels within a year of game.

Classic Traveller used the very reasonable notion that the PCs would already be experienced and would advance economically, politically, and otherwise. This was in 1977, and yet, over 25 years later, the majority of gamers just want to kill things, take their stuff, and gain levels.

**"I don't want to learn a new system"**

This is less of a peeve and more a fundamental difference between the majority of gamers and myself. I have never felt this way about any game; in fact, I have bought games specifically because they use a new system and do something differently. How many gamers say that they do not want to learn how to play Settlers of Catan because they already know how to play Monopoly?

With a complex game like d20, it takes a long time to learn all its nuances and options. But I like games that do not require such a long time to master. Roleplaying games are not board games; I don't want the rules to take "a minute to learn but a lifetime to master." Rather, I want to master the rules fairly quickly so that I can get on to the important part—the roleplaying.

Understand that I have no issue if you have a favorite system that matches well with your style of playing, and you want to use it in preference to other systems. Nor do I object the quest for such an uber-system. I simply do not understand those who outright reject the notion of learning a different system for no other reason than it is something new.

**Technology and Magic Revisited**

After reading all of your excellent comments, I finally have something to say on this topic.

Clarke's Law<sup>3</sup> makes it impossible to create a useful definition that distinguishes between technology and magic. Initially the differences seem clear, but one can always define magic such that it works similar to technology and visa-versa.<sup>4</sup> In other words, any sufficiently defined magic is indistinguishable from technology.

The paradox of magic is that it defies the laws of nature while at the same time becoming a law of nature itself. This is why magic quickly morphs into technology and becomes mundane (at least to those who use it, such as PCs). No matter how unpredictable or complex you make magic, it remains a tool and a technology to be used by those with the talent, will, and patience to do so.

Technology, or at least mass technology, is the great equalizer. It gives power to those who might not otherwise have it. Power to kill. Power to communicate. Power to lounge. It is this equalizing factor, I feel, which truly drives gun proponents. Magic also provides power, but it is usually highly restricted and not at all egalitarian. But of course, this changes if you give everyone access to magic.

The form of technology or magic shapes their function. Technology, at least until you get up to genetic engineering and other transhuman elements, relies upon objects that must be purchased and can be stolen and broken. While this also applies to magical items, most magic, even ubiquitous magic, works very differently than a microwave oven or a cell phone.

In reading all your comments about cell phones, it occurs to me that cell phones have a massive and expensive infrastructure to support their use. They are the latest incarnation of a telecommunications system that has been developing and growing for well over a century. Also remember that new technologies are built upon on older technologies, often from unrelated fields. You cannot have cell phones without radio, batteries, or solid state electronics and all the technologies used in manufacturing and the infrastructure (fiber optics, computing, billing etc.). Magic tends not to work this way, but of course, you can always define your magic to work this way if you want.

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia actually refers to it as his third law.

<sup>4</sup> This is also why my definition of science-fiction versus fantasy, mentioned a while ago, is fundamentally flawed, but I still like it.

## Faith-Based Violence

Faith has no place in most rpgs. The existence of supernatural powers is not a matter of faith, but one of fact. The abilities shown by clerics and their ilk have a repeatability and predictability that would convince any skeptical scientist. So if "faith" conveys special advantages (like spells) and disadvantages (like restrictions on how one fights), then of course faith-based violence should carry similar dis/advantages.

Does simply having faith in a weapon, ideal, etc. convey dis/advantages in the way going berserk does? I would question whether going berserk does convey any benefits. A crazed frame of mind is always helpful in psyching oneself up for going into combat, but I doubt if it really makes you a better fighter. Perhaps you will stay in the fight longer the more determined and motivated you are, but how is this different than fighting for any cause, including one's own life? "Wanting it more" only gives you the edge when you are otherwise equally matched with your opponent.

If you want to add some bonuses, such as increased damage resistance, to someone in a righteous frenzy and create rules regarding when and how the frenzy comes into play, I think it can be done reasonably but it also must be done fairly. If the bonus comes from within the character's psyche, rather than some outside divine intervention or mystical power source, then anyone should be capable of it no matter their faith or their cause. The use of a willpower stat to resist the affects of damage does this neatly.

Does it have moral implications? Of course—violence always does. The paradox of righteous violence is that everyone believes they are righteous and that God is on their side. In fact, I have never seen an rpg address this paradox. A god of war or destruction might grant both sides favor, but what of a god of mercy or justice? What happens when two paladins of the same god fight?

## Ending a Playing Session

Most games I play have a semi-hard "must end by" time. For example, some of the Friday-night CoC players have to catch BART and my Sunday Angel game should end by dinner time. And of course, convention games have a definite time limit. Once we get to an appropriate moment in the game that is close enough to the "must end by" time, we end the game. My Angel campaign is a series of investigations that only last one session (4-6 hours) each, so we just play until we are done. With CoC, we are currently running the pre-packaged<sup>5</sup> campaign Beyond The Mountains of Madness, so there is more flexibility regarding when each session ends, but it is usually pretty clear when a good time to stop arrives.

<sup>5</sup> This still did not prevent our GM from preparing over 50 pages of notes for the campaign. It would be an understatement to say he likes to be prepared.

## Lee Gold

I think gamers want a chance to express their individuality unfettered by authority (law and its enforcers). Some do this by becoming the authority, but unlike Judge Dee, they follow their own rules and not those of their superiors or the culture. Then again, this is a very common theme in American culture, it seems and may not apply elsewhere.

I prefer fairly broad abilities that encompass a variety of applications. Thus, I define Melee to include the ability to perceive, analyze, plan, launch, aim, and avoid hand-to-hand attacks with and without weapons.

In many ways, Angel and Buffy are the same game with cosmetic changes because Angel is skewed to PCs who are experienced adults and not teenagers. Many of the demon qualities found in the Buffy supplements are provided in the Angel character creation while the latter lacks the Slayer and quasi-Slayer options. Angel gives less details on weapons but includes mostly-pointless rules for creating organizations (like evil law firms and supernatural detectives agencies).

## Joshua Kronengold

Yes, my card system is opposed because that is the only way the card-swap mechanism makes sense. I am not convinced it makes sense to put a skill-based cap on damage the way UA does, especially for guns.

## Brian Misiaszek

The "one bad roll = death" problem is not really solved by changing the dice used. Whether the odds were 5% or 1% or 0.02%, I think you would still be dissatisfied. The precautions that you made were completely circumvented by the attack; it would appear you were unaware of the risks involved. It is one thing to risk a character with 5% chance of death when you know the odds and a completely different matter when it blindsides you and your character drops dead.

In the D&D games I have played, it was not uncommon for the GM to throw opponents that required a 17 or better to hit. The party thief or wizard might have needed a natural 20 to hit. By moving from a d20 to 2d10 or other method, you are dropping the odds of success from 20% or 5% to 10% or 1%. In addition to changing the dice, there needs to be a shift in how the GM thinks about opponents. But if you have a capable GM willing to do that, you might not need to change the dice at all.

I was tempted lately to pick up Savage Worlds with Christmas gift money, but decided that the errata was so large I might as well wait for the next edition or printing or at the very least wait until I am in a SW campaign. Maybe by then, they will choose different paper and/or cover.

One of the biggest barriers to having players play magic-users is the extra rules required. Obfuscating the rules of magic through complex interactions would increase the barrier. The randomness inherent in most magic systems (the damage from a fireball, whether the target makes a saving throw, etc.) can be explained by the complex and unpredictable nature of spell casting.

For the most part, I do believe that gamers are simply unimaginative, but there is also a major factor of time that goes into creating a game world. Canned game worlds and adventures are like canned food—they do have their purpose and are not all bad.

Sorry to hear about the Hackmaster campaign; I sympathize with your frustrations. Is it possible to create a second, more combat-oriented PC or has the taste of the game soured too much for you?

#### Lisa Padol

I agree completely that making an IC response to an OOC comment legitimizes the OOC comment. I find such snarky behavior more disruptive than OOC comments.

I find that players who make a point of using lucky dice or swapping out bad dice keeps the focus of the game on dice and rolling well rather than roleplaying.

#### Simon Reeve

GURPS' "scaling problem" is addressed in *GURPS Bunnies & Burrows*, which also has a detailed approach to animal languages, including pidgin versions. For a faerie-centric campaign, I agree that *GURPS Faerie* should have included scaling guidelines similar to *B&B*.

#### Brian Rogers

My very first contact back in 6<sup>th</sup> grade was with a system that was AD&D in name only. The actual system was completely made up by the GM—it was a hybrid of AD&D concepts and the make-believe games we played as recently as the year before.

For most of my gaming life (which constitutes most of my life), I was a player. Even now, I consider myself only a part-time GM. As such, I never explored the game mechanics system like you did with V&V. Maybe that is why I do not have a favorite system, though I have great fondness for Amber, my first success as a GM after many early pathetic, sputtering attempts at AD&D, and others.

#### Marco Subias

I never saw the need for something like DG to justify the existence of CoC groups. All it takes is players and GM working in cooperation. In my only DG campaign, the PCs survived their encounters with the paranormal without any discretion and solidified their reputation as insane, unreliable people. :)

#### Paul Cardwell

I would go one step further and say that all religious violence is tribal. Religious violence has the same "us versus them" fervor that you see between secular tribes.

#### Viktor Haag

Unfortunately CD and DC are just NPCs. When I name characters, there is no such thing as a coincidence.

#### Spike Y Jones

Several games, including D&D, Hero, and BESM, have a single combat rating (BAB, OCV, and ACV) that can be increased or specialized with feats, combat levels, or skills. I have nothing against this approach, but it did not fit the game I was trying to design. I was not using stats, only skills, and a single combat skill would have been too broad compared to the others.

Based on your description, I will definitely take a look at *Faery's Tale* when it becomes available.

#### Paul Mason

The xenozine logo has been on my website and I had wanted to put it here for a while but had difficulty getting the look right.

I agree on dice "standing in" for the actions of the character. This, and the illusion of control, are two reasons why players insist on rolling their own dice.

Since all the "narrative" games I have seen have mechanics that distract from the game reality, would you consider all such mechanics bad or just bad for games focused on immersion?

#### Brian Misiaszek

M&M's Hero Points allow you to re-roll the d20 (M&M only uses d20s) with a guaranteed minimum roll of 10. By default each character has 5 Hero Points, but more can be purchased if desired.

#### Lisa Padol

The Fifth Street Bookstore and its employees are a bit of background fluff of my Angel campaign. Deni has yet to make an on-screen appearance. Malcolm Devereaux, the owner and the PCs' patron, is a mysterious figure not unlike a mystical version of Charlie from that other "Angel" television show. And just to show how much of a hypocrite I am, he is played by Jon Polito (being at least partially inspired by his character from Sci-Fi's *The Chronicle*). To keep him mysterious, I have not committed any details about him to text.