

## Ignorable Theme

### The Typical Campaign City

Most of my cities tend to be boring and lack any character of their own. I think this is because I live in the midst of boring urban sprawl devoid of character.

My Angel game was set in San Francisco as a way to force character into the campaign, but it did not help much.

My M&M campaign is set in the fictional city of Devon, California. I asked my players if they wanted a real city or a fictional one and those a fictional one. I wrote up the following history as a means to get my head around the city, but only added the modern-day details as needed for the campaign. See, the PCs were transported to an alternate reality in which Devon, and the entire globe, was overrun by alien beings. The Devon they came to was deserted except for a small group of humans struggling to survive. This means I do not need much information on the city, since it is like any other post-apocalyptic urban wasteland. If the campaign expands, so will Devon.

### Devon, California

Devon was founded in the early 17th century by English settlers who came to the site where Sir Francis Drake landed during his circumnavigation of the globe and where he subsequently claimed all of Nova Albion for Queen Elizabeth. Continued conflict with Spain and Devon's remoteness compared to the other American colonies greatly limited England's support of the colony and somewhat hampered its growth. Even so, the mild climate and peaceful coexistence with the native tribes (as first established by Drake's initial peaceful contact with them) allowed the colony to flourish through the 1600's and 1700's.

The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw profitable and peaceful relations with Russian and British traders in the Pacific Northwest. The region was very well established by the time Father Junípero Serra began building his missions in California. Devon was claimed by Britain and Mexico while the United States wanted it for its own. An uneasy, unofficial truce lasted for several decades until the Mexican-American war came to the region in 1846. The day after John C. Frémont began his rebellion against Mexico, Britain and the United States set the southern boundary of British North America at the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, which officially ended any British claim on Devon. In 1848, California, including the Devon, was annexed by the United States. Immediately following the war, gold was discovered in the Sierra-Nevada. Both Devon and San Francisco strained to handle the great influx of immigrants into the region. After the gold was

discovered in Colorado, the boom ended and Devon continued to grow at a sustainable pace for the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought many technological and cultural changes to Devon. When the 1906 earthquake devastated San Francisco, Devon was left relatively unscathed. Devon was poised to become the movie capital of California before investors in Los Angeles lured the major studios down south. The Great Depression brought another influx of people to California and many settled in Drake County. The city was becoming more industrialized as farm and logging land was consumed by the growing population and suburbs sprang up like mushrooms following World War II. As San Francisco was making a name for itself as a haven for beatniks, artists, and hippies, Devon evolved into a more conservative, corporate-friendly city.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Devon is at the forefront of technological development and progress. This was symbolized by the completion of the Corwin Center in 2002 (a year behind schedule). The Center was spearheaded by Roger Corwin, whose Corwin Cable dominates the region and has spread into other media and technological outlets. His often publicized rival is Darien Thornton, the CEO of Versynt Technologies and owner of the the Devon Gazette newspaper.

The San Diego Clippers moved to Devon in 1984 and continue to draw respectable crowds despite mediocre performance. They play in Versynt Arena. The sentimental favorite sports franchise are the Devon Dragons, a Pacific Coast League affiliate of the San Francisco Giants, which is owned by a coalition of local business.

The two major colleges are Cal Poly Devon and University of the Pacific at Devon. There are also a number of 2-year colleges and trade schools.

**All**

Thank you all for the positive feedback.

I guess I should have provided a proper introduction to Ingrid. She was a character I was playing on rpol.net before the game folded and was deleted by the GM. Everything I wrote was background, and some of the story was forced to correlate with what her 2<sup>nd</sup> level (Fighter 1 + Rogue 1) character sheet said. Of course, I took a lot of liberty in the action scenes and it would probably not play out the way it did if I actually ran the encounter and rolled dice, but a little artistic license for background is acceptable, I think.

When I make character backgrounds, I often have in mind specific scenes that illustrate who the character is and where she or he comes from. These scenes represent my first attempts to find the character's voice and personality. Hopefully, it carries over to when I actually roleplay the character. Ingrid's story is much longer than I typically write, but I really wanted three scenes (and ended up with four).

**Robert A Dushay, PhD**

One way to handle a large number of spells in OTE is to correlate the number of spells known to the number of dice in magic. With 1D, you might know 1 spell; with 4D, you might know 100; it all depends on how you want to scale it. Of course, all these spells need to be described and quantified, which is a chore for any game system.

**Lee Gold**

Giving an advanced PC to a newbie player (new to roleplaying or just new to the system) can be too overwhelming if the player needs to know a number of different rules to effectively use the PC's abilities.

**Joshua Kronengold**

What makes D&D-style advancement different from other sources (like comics, television, etc.) is the *speed* of advancement. A PC can easily go from 1<sup>st</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> level within a year of game time, depending on how much downtime the GM forces upon the PCs. Pendragon and Ars Magica, for example, deliberately slow advancement by increasing the interval between adventures. D&D gets particularly ridiculous when you look at the natural lifespans of demi-humans and wonder why elves, dwarves, etc. are not higher levels.

Because PCs get so powerful so young, you do not see their powers decline due to age or lack of use. The only mechanic to diminish a PC's power is through level-draining monsters and powerful spells like Polymorph Other and these tactics are likely to earn the GM the animosity of the players.

Most games allow for the possibility that you can

both deliver and receive a wound in the same round against the same opponent. The issue is simultaneity. But timing can be very tricky, especially if you want to integrate tactical movement into the mix. When trying to run truly simultaneous combat rounds, I invariably run into problems visualizing and describing the scene if it involves actions more complex than two people thwacking on each other.

**Paul Mason**

I think creating stories would be a good way to practice a new language. Making it interactive is a good way of getting everyone involved, working together, and practicing their verbal skills. Plus you get something tangible that the student can appreciate as a payoff for their studying and creativity, especially if you have someone writing the story down.

While I agree that characters should be ready to play in 30 minutes or less, I do think more time can be well spent developing the character's background, personality, and place in the campaign. In many cases, this can be done after the start of the campaign.

Your example of Yang Ming includes a lot of numerical modifiers that lack any supporting description. I have little idea what a -2, +1, or +3 signify in terms of actual ability. I think +3 is better than +1, but I don't know how much better or how good +1 is relative to someone at +0.

I like the yin/yang dice. The fact that most white dice have black pips and black dice have white pips is quite appropriate. I like having the option of rolling 3 (or more dice), but I wish I had a good idea of what range of numbers you are thinking about. How high do you expect the abilities to go?

If you have to roll a 12 or less, you are better off rolling 2 dice than 3. With 2 dice, you have a 38.9% chance of getting a degree of success of 6 or higher. With 3 dice, the percentage goes down to 30.1% because the chance of outright failure goes from 0.0% up to 25.9%. I have to crunch more numbers to find the cusp where rolling more dice makes sense.

It is possible for someone to roll doubles (say, 2 and 2) and have a lower degree of success than someone whose yin and yang are out of balance (say, 1 and 5). Is this acceptable?

**Brian Christopher Misiaszek**

One solution to the possibly of rolling horrible damage for a critical hit is to automatically do maximum damage on a critical hit. However, this might be overkill when combined with the standard x2 or x3 multiplier.

I am a big fan of short campaigns lasting 2d4 sessions. These have a little more body than simple one-shots without the messy dangliness and work of longer campaigns.

### **Mark Nemeth**

Whether or not 500 words is excessive for an encounter depends on the GM. Some GMs are able to take a 50-word description and fill in the rest, while others feel more comfortable with very little improvisation.

When you run a game and the PCs enter a "cheese storage chamber," how much of the room do you describe? Do you note the smell? Do you care how the secret door works? What do you do when a player asks about the variety of cheeses stored there? It is safer, I think, for a published adventure to include this information rather than leave it out; after all, some GMs may want it. A GM who is used to making stuff up will ignore it. I do think that if there are vital bits of information (like a clue or plot point) in an encounter, these should be highlighted and not buried in flavor text.

In making my own adventures, I try to have a good idea in my head about the scene and how it will go. When I write up the adventure for someone else to use, I need to be as clear and complete as possible. Does that require 500 words? Looking at my Bunnies & Burrows adventure, the encounter with the stream was 500 words, but the rendezvous point was only 200. In both cases, I mostly left the physical description to the GM and players' imagination.

The detail of the Alabaster Cave was not too little, but then there was not much to the encounters except to survive them. The only NPC to talk to was Oldarek, but since you did not mention what his motivations might be or alternative ways to engage him, I can only assume he exists to be fought. For this, you do not need many words. What I did find missing is an adequate description of the outside of the cave. Are there trails leading to the various entrances? How visible are the cave mouths from a distance? How would you expect the PCs to approach the hill?

### **Jonathan Nichols**

So what do you say of executives who are richly compensated despite poor performance? What about those who are hired and compensated very well despite a shameful resume and track record? The qualities you label (a) and (b) seem to far outweigh their true ability (c); the ultimate expression of this can be seen in the US's current Chief Executive.

One of the key flaws of the GNS nomenclature is your statement "Champions, which has fairly strong *Gamist* leanings, mostly because it does a good job of *simulating* superheroic leanings..." So is Champions gamist or simulationist? The other key flaw is that GNS says nothing about roleplaying yet it claims to describe roleplaying games.

"What's the point of a wager if it doesn't change your odds?" To someone who plays blackjack, craps, or the ponies, this question is nonsensical.

### **Lisa Padol**

A GM who would spring a trap upon the players in the way you describe is something I would expect from a "killer GM." I do not play those kinds of games and I would be insulted if my players I thought I would do something like that to them. This is also related to the dithering issue. As others have said, if the players trust that the GM is not going to screw them over for a lack of planning, they tend to dither less.

### **James Reichstadt**

If your group used roleplaying an imagination to differentiate characters that were practically identical in game terms, I think you must have had a very good group. I do not see this from most gamers, who still balk at the idea of creating a 100-word background for their characters or answering a 12-item questionnaire. Some people do find that complex, point-based character creation leads to a richer, deeper character background to justify and explain where those points are going.

A classic example of roleplaying laziness is to describe characters by their charisma score rather than by what they actually look like. This phenomena has existed since day one and is not the fault of MMORPGs, CRPGs, or anything besides the *players and GMs*.

### **Brian Rogers**

I do not dislike V&V's defense chart for the reasons you give. I just think it (and other bits of the system) and the terms "rules-light" do not mix. A rules-light approach would be to leave the modifiers (such as a bonus/penalty die in OTE or +/- 1 in Fudge) to the GM.

### **Jim Vassilakos**

Comments can be the most important part of an APA. Sharing ideas is good, but discussing them is better if you want the ideas to grow and flourish. Since we pay for every page we write in A&E and it is only published once per month, the discussion tends to be more civilized, more thoughtful, and simply more constructive than you get on the Internet. You should embrace comments, not avoid them.

Are game balance and character development "obvious issues?" Can you have a good game without game balance and traditional character development? I say yes. Furthermore, I think these two elements of game design are not as important as most gamers make them out to be.

As I have said a lot recently, the important part of character development for me has nothing to do with rules and special abilities. Rather, the personal and emotional development of the character is what I find interesting and important. I realize that most gamers do not feel that way.