

Ignorable Theme

NPC-Only Powers (or races or skills)

My first rpg was 1st Edition AD&D. The selection of PC races and abilities as very limited to what was available in the Monster Manual. PCs were not allowed to be Drow or Centaurs. PCs were not allowed to have dragon breath or shape shifting (though they did have access to spells with similar effects). I never had a problem with this. It never occurred to me that it was a problem. I still do not think it is.

I think it is perfectly acceptable for the GM to place reasonable limits on PCs in terms of powers, race, or skills. Focus is a good thing though too much focus can be bad. In my experience, those who want to play an NPC-only race and whine about it are those who are only looking to have the special abilities and/or they just want to be cool and different.

Another example that occurs to me is Star Wars. At least in the WEG version, the PCs were assumed to be heroes. If they accumulated enough Dark Side points, they became NPCs. Because of this, NPCs had access to Dark Side powers that the PCs did not. I see nothing wrong with this. The GM is free to allow Sith PCs, but also free to exclude them and mature players should understand that.

But GMs must be careful of the "neener-neener" factor. The NPCs should never come across displaying superior powers simply because the GM wants to show off. No matter what their abilities, the PCs are the stars of the story and the GM should not allow NPCs to overshadow them. So long as the PCs have their own cool abilities, it should not matter if NPCs do too.

A Tale of Two Projects

I have two projects that I have been poking at for several years now. One is a superhero game and the other is a fantasy game (featured in my Daphne & Bertwald campaign and an article on the world's religion a while back). Between running M&M and playing in a Castle Falkenstein one-shot, I have been inspired to take more pokes at these.

To that end (and to force myself forward), I will be writing about both in these pages and hope they will generate enough interest for comments. I will focus on system for the superhero game (as there are so many ways to take the genre that I want to leave the system open) and setting for the fantasy game (as I can see it being used for any number of systems, including d20, GURPS, Fudge, or Pendragon). Do not be surprised if I repeat or contradict myself month-to-month. :)

SSΩ: Super System Omega

SSΩ is heavily influenced by M&M, which I think took a welcome step forward in power abstraction, but stopped short of what I would call ideal. I do not even think this is because of M&M's d20 roots, though I do think the implementation of D&D abilities is somewhat forced. M&M provides a formal structure for powers that is not unlike those found in Hero, SAS, and other point-based systems, but M&M reads to me as a system striving to break free of that structure. I also suspect the final product will have several fudge-like elements to it.

The core of SSΩ is simply a means of comparison. To hit, compare the attack ability (melee, ranged, or mental) to the defense (physical or mental) of the target. To do damage, compare the power of the attack to the protection of the target. Attacks are defined by what defense and protection they roll against and the effect they have if successful. The major open item I have right now is if I want to combine defenses and toughness into a single damage roll (like M&M does) or have them separate the way Hero (and most games) does it.

How the comparisons are made will probably involve dice though a resource-management mechanic would not be inappropriate, especially as an optional rule. I am going with a simple dice+ability system because the scale slides up and down more easily than a dice pool and gives me more flexibility. For example, I could do something like d20 or something zero-centered like Fudge or Feng Shui. The dice version of SSΩ will probably include rules for hero points, though I am not entirely sold on the notion.

I will not worry about game balance. Much. Character creation will be point-based, but without the expectation that equal points means equal ability. Instead, the points will be used primarily to keep ability levels within the same general range and as a guide for GMs to eyeball potential effectiveness. For example, if your attack power is 5 but the average defense is 10, you might have trouble affecting your targets in a 2d6+5 vs. 2d6+10 comparison.

All attack, defensive, and movement powers will have a power rank. Other powers, like etherealness and invisibility, which may not need a rank, will probably be given a rank for the sake of comparison and attacks like power drain. However, I will not be afraid to ignore power ranks when it does not make sense or feels awkward or unnatural. This is especially true of minor powers that are either too weak to fit well on any scale (like telekinesis that can only lift a few ounces) or provide only marginal utility (like being able to change a target's color).

All powers will use the same scale. So that a rank 8 of super-strength lifts the same amount as rank 8 in telekinesis and they both deliver the same damage as a rank 8 chemical spray. Rank 4 flight is as quick as rank 4 running and both can move as far in one round as a rank 4 teleporter or leaper. Some powers might have a rank 0 to represent minimal ability, such as being able to levitate, but not fly.

Mechanical effects of powers will be very abstract; a plasma blast has the same effect as a bullet. However, given comments between myself and Brian Rogers, I will include guidelines to allow bonuses or penalties when contrasted powers pair off, like a jet of flame against an ice shield. Other effects, such as starting residual fires with a fireball, will be handled as part of the roleplaying and power description.

There will be a list of powers, but I want to stress that they will be examples of how the powers work in the system and not a definitive or exhaustive list. The power creation rules for SSΩ will be dreadfully simple: describe what the power does and then give it a rank. I will include power advantages and disadvantages as examples of ways to make a power more or less effective than similar powers (like making a force field hardened or ablative), but I want to stress that one does not buy a "force field, hardened (+1)" but buys a "Bulletproof Chronosphere."

I do not plan on using traditional attributes and skills, but instead use a system close to Castle Falkenstein or Cartoon Action Hour. The ability list might look something like this:

- Athletics
- Charisma
- Driving
- Evade
- Fighting
- Marksmanship
- Perception
- Physique
- Power Control
- Resources
- Status
- Stealth
- Tinkering
- Willpower

As you can see, the abilities are fairly broad, but specialization would be possible. This is not a definitive or finalized list (Knowledge in particular needs to be better defined). Players could also create new abilities.

The range for abilities will depend on what dice I end up using. However, I am leaning towards a mundane scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being an average person. Below average ability would either be represented by a negative number (-1 or -2 at most) or simply handled through roleplaying or faults.

I have already written up the important (as in system non-specific roleplaying) elements about super hero character creation here:

<http://www.xenongames.com/creation.htm>. This document also describes how SSΩ will handle character faults: using them to earn extra experience for the character, not to get bonus points during character creation.

The world of Vhallan is a traditional pseudo-European-medieval setting. I make no claims to being novel or original. I plan to leave the big secrets of world (such as the true nature of the gods, whether or not prayers to the divine actually do anything, and if dragons truly exist) open to the GM.

Races and Monsters

There are no traditional fantasy races, only humans. There are faeries, spirits, and daemons (spelling deliberate), but nothing that could be classified as a race as we understand them from most fantasy worlds.

The Fae of Vhallan follow many of the traditional European depictions of faeries from medieval to Victorian times. They are capricious, mysterious, and ultimately incomprehensible. They seem to follow their own strict rules of behavior, but these rules confound human logic. The realm of faeries is not a single place, but a number of pockets that are connected to the mortal world. Some of these pockets are vast while others are tiny. Whether or not these pockets are connected has yet to be verified by humans and the fae are not saying. The bridges between the two realms can consist of a single focal point, such as a faerie mound, or an area with no discernible boundaries such as a deep wood. They may be active constantly or only during certain key times, such as a new moon or equinox.

Monsters like ogres, basilisks, and even some forms of undead exist, but they tend to be isolated individuals and either a type of fae or the product of sorcery. There are no dragons, but they exist in the folklore and legends of Vhallan. There are tales of brave knights and cunning rogues getting the best of dragons and there are tales of dragons wreaking havoc and destruction upon cities and armies. But no one has actually *seen* one.

Glamours

Glamours are the most common form of magic used by fae. They are illusions of the utmost degree. A glamorous or chimerical gold coin is so life-like that it can even fool a scale. But break the glamour, and it reverts back to what it truly is, such as a leaf or a stone. Glamours can be used to create anything out of thin air, but these things have no true essence. Clothes woven from glamour are beautiful and may feel heavy and warm, but they provide no protection against the elements. A person can starve eating delicious chimerical food without even knowing it. Creatures made out of glamour have no soul, but they have real teeth and claws that can render and tear. Such beasts are usually grotesque caricatures of their animal templates.

Sorcery

Sorcery, the art of magic, can be learned and used by anyone, but sorcerers guard their secrets closely—too closely to form magical colleges or mystic lodges. However, just as some people possess a natural aptitude for athletics, singing, or any other ability, some people are more talented in magic. Most magic involves rituals that take minutes, hours, or even days to complete, but spontaneous magical spells do exist.

The key to magic are the words. The words themselves have the power to shape reality if only the speaker has the force of will and secret knowledge (simply reciting the words does nothing unless you know what they *mean*). Sorcerers must speak the words aloud with vigor to give them life. One can sometimes tell the experience of a sorcerer by the volume of her voice and how many times the words must be repeated. Magic also takes a physical and mental toll on the sorcerer. Even so, elderly, experienced sorcerers suffer fewer ill effects than healthy, youthful novices.

Almost all magical items must be engraved with runes or magical script. The only exception to this are potions, oils, and similar concoctions. Even so, runes are typically used on their vessels to prevent the enchantment from fading. Some items are created by the summoning and binding of daemons, but this is a technique that holds many dangers.

Magic cannot change the true essence of something. It cannot turn lead into gold. Glamours, especially those used by the fae, can make lead seem to be gold (so much so that it would even fool a scale), but glamours always have flaw (often a time limit) can always be broken. It is possible to change a person into another animal (though changing the mass, such as a man into a toad, can greatly increase the difficulty), but the animal would still have the soul, but not necessarily the mind, of a person. I still have work out all the implications of this rule and come up with further examples about what is or is not possible.

Of Gods and Miracles

Religion is an important part of the culture, but Vhallan does not have the overt spell casting clerics of D&D. People firmly believe that divine miracles happen and that priests channel the power of the gods to do good works, but the mechanical effect (if any) is completely hidden. For example, there are no healing spells. However, an injured person under a priest's care may claim he is being healed by the goddess Aurora, but it may just be good medical care. Any bonuses due to piety, such as calling for the power of Merrick before battle, would be handled by the GM in secret and may not actually have any effect if the GM decides that divine grace does not actually exist.

Questionnaire

This was the questionnaire that I had my players compete for my M&M campaign, but only 3 of the 4 actually did. Even the 3 grouched and procrastinated about not having the time, etc., etc. I was not encouraged, but I appreciated what effort they did apply to the questionnaire.

We are not looking for short, trite answers, but thought out responses that reveal something about your character. Answer these *in character* using your character's voice.

1. What is your name? What do people call you? What do you prefer to be called?
2. What do you look like? What ethnicity are you? What kind of clothes do you wear? Do you have any distinguishing features? (If you want your character to be particularly attractive, be sure to purchase the Attractive feat.)
3. What kind of person are you? What do other people think of you? What is your personal philosophy, belief system, or outlook on life? What are your pet peeves?
4. When and where were you born? (If you know any languages besides English because of where you were born or how you were raised, be sure to purchase levels of the Language skill.)
5. Do you have any family? What are they like? How do you feel about them? How do they feel about you? Are they an active part of your life?
6. Do you have "someone special" in your life? If so, describe this person and your relationship. If not, why not?
7. What is your life like? What do you do during a typical day? How about the weekends? What do you do for a living? What do you do in your spare time?
8. What events in your life lead up to this point? What was your childhood like? What key events, people, and relationships shaped your life?
9. If you had the opportunity to "do it all over" knowing what you know now, what would be different?
10. Are you a cat person, dog person, fish person, or <insert other animal> person? How so?
11. Have you ever been in a fight? If so, describe it (or them). If not, explain how you avoid them.
12. Why are you in the Corwin Center? If you live there, describe your home. If you work there, describe your office. If you are just visiting, explain the reason for your visit.

Lastly, I had them prioritize their preference for superpowers among 4 categories: offense, defense, movement, and utility.

Our Heroes

Wendell Hobson

"Director of Utility Services" at the Corwin Center.

Powers: Utility > Movement > Defense > Offense

I expected this kind of preference from Merwin, Wendell's player. I gave him Elasticity as his primary power (it includes the ability to move quickly) with Shapeshift and boosted Reflex and Fortitude saves (plus Evasion so he uses is Reflex save as Damage saves). Wendell's greatest contribution to the group was as the techie—the guy who could figure out the alien technology (even though he needed Nicholas to operate it) and use it to their advantage.

Mike Verrecchia

CIA operative code named "Big Brother."

Currently on vacation and staying at his residence in the Center.

Powers: Offense > Defense > Movement > Utility

Mike's player, Josh, threw me a curve ball by giving Mike a dog ("CK" or Commie Killer¹) and the dog ended up getting super powers as well. But that is why they make rules for sidekicks. I gave Mike both energy field (which damages anything he touches or touches him) and energy blast with a protective force field. His dog has a similar energy field and incorporeal (a power that is easier balanced in a pseudo-NPC than a PC). Mike was the heavy hitter of the group and was able to blast his way through the alien menace.

Ariel Skye Sawyer

Cab driver whose parents live in the Corwin Center (her father was one of its architects).

Powers: Movement > Defense > Offense > Utility

What is the classic movement power? Flight, of course. Plus, it seemed to fit her name. She had large, telekinetic wings that gave her incredible flying speed but could also deflect and reflect attacks. Later, the player, Jenn, added the ability to bash people with the wings. Not only was Ariel the only woman, but the only PC without military experience. She became the voice of morality for the group and while she was not as useful tactically, her character supplied much needed balance.

Nicholas Bennet

Data entry rep working for an insurance company with offices in the Center.

Powers: Unstated.

Jane, Nicholas's player, never did complete the questionnaire, but did give me a brief character description. I was challenged coming up with his powers, but in situations like this, I fall back on my old friend irony. What power would you give someone

¹ Yes, Josh is a bit of a goof. In my Angel game, he played the PI/stoner/marksman. But at least he is an amusing goof. :)

who believes "the Corwin Center is part of a grand conspiracy theory concerning brainwashing and technology?" Mind control. And precognition, so I could mess with his perceptions.² Jane specified verbally that she wanted something stealth-related, so I gave Nicholas Invisibility that only worked on creatures, as in "you don't see me." I also tacked on telepathy. All of Nicholas's mental powers, including invisibility, worked on groups and allowed our heroes to infiltrate the alien base/dreadnought and take over the ship.

The Premise and The Plan

Aliens called the Scourge invade earth from another reality. Our heroes did not notice it because they were heading down an elevator at the time. They were sucked through the riptide of the alien's dimensional portal and ended up in an alternate version of earth which the Scourge had invaded and subjugated twenty years previously.

The use of these portals creates an exotic type of radiation called "zeta radiation." At low levels, it is relatively harmless, not unlike ultraviolet, but at higher doses, it has a profound effect on organic material, especially DNA. Our heroes were exposed to an extraordinary amount of zeta radiation—more than any human ever—but had just enough shielding from the elevator itself that they survived.

Over the next four sessions, they had to find a way back home and possibly save the humans that the Scourge had either enslaved or forced to live in squalid, starvation-level conditions. Fortunately, the zeta radiation gave them super powers.

As they were ready to return home, they discovered that the Scourge had established portals across the globe (centered on major urban areas) in their reality. They set upon a risky but bold plan to destroy all the portals with one blow as they returned. The plan worked! But it also caused their Earth to become bathed in zeta radiation from the exploding portals. And so, they not only became the first superhumans ever, but they were the trigger event for all superhumans thereafter.

The Experience

I was going to do a campaign write-up, but lost the momentum. However, I would like to ramble on a bit about the experience.

M&M has worked out about as well as I had expected. The biggest problem I have is that I cannot subtract 17 from 24 on a damage save to determine whether an attack just bruised or stunned. I swear, when I roleplay, the left side of my brain leaves the

² Actually, I had the precognition kick in *before* they got superpowers. You can interpret this (as Nicholas did) as proof that he had been experimented on by the government or (as I intended) that it was a cool side-effect of the temporal-twisting nature of precognition.

building. It is very frustrating!

I have been forcing myself to refer to rules rather than simply ruling what sounds good at the time. When I GM, I also seem to have a problem recalling the exact rule I need, but I have no problem as a player. That vacationing left side again. Fortunately, my players are patient and willing to look up rules for me while I deal with other characters. Part of my goal for SSΩ is to create a set of rules where "what sounds good at the time" matches what the rules say.

Here is an example of how I used the rules. One of the PCs has the elongation power. It was questioned how thin the character could stretch. This was important when he was trying to escape from the alien brig. I looked at the ranks he had in elongation, 10, and asked "how small could someone with the shrinking power at that same rank get?" The answer was 6 inches, which seemed to fit the character concept well. While he could get a finger or even an arm through a tight crevice, he could not squeeze his entire body through an opening less than 6 inches wide.

In this first adventure, the aliens used stun sticks not unlike tasers. My justification was that they wanted to take humans alive as slaves if at all possible. However, others used a more conventional electricity-based energy blast when actual property damage was required. This led to confusion between characters who were under the effects of the stun power and those who were stunned because of a failed damage save.

After they defeated the first group of aliens, one of the PCs, Nicholas, picked up the stun sticks and found he could use them. But when he handed them to another PC, nothing happened. Investigation by the engineer of the group revealed the sticks had no mechanism for turning them on or off. This eventually led to the realization that the aliens were all mildly telepathic and used telepathy to control their technology. This also meant that the Nicholas was also telepathic (actually, he was using mind control rather than telepathy, but it was close enough).

M&M has serious balance issues. This is well known among M&M community. Character concept has to take higher priority than point tweaking. Protection, as an example, makes a character immune to physical attacks at a rank at or below the protection rank. But it costs the same as an ordinary force field that offers no such immunity. Even so, it seemed appropriate for Mike. Besides, I ruled the stunner bypassed protection (because the stun power is based on Fortitude saves and not Damage saves) and I was able to effectively take him out with mental blasts when I needed to. This lack of forced game balance is something I want to bring to SSΩ.

Savage Worlds

I wrote up my notes on SSΩ and Vhallan early in the month, but then in the middle of month, Great White Games revised their PDF of Savage Worlds to fix some editing problems and I could not stop myself from buying it. In some ways, I actually prefer PDFs to print books because I can print them for free at work and I can be as rough on them as I want to be because I know I can always replace pages. Rather than pay to have it bound, I simply used a three-ring binder. Yes, I'm cheap that way. Besides, this allows me to replace individual pages and insert dividers and extra material (like a fan-compiled list of monsters and animals) much more conveniently.

The point I wanted to make when I started this (as I seem to be rambling) was that after reading SW, I now want to run a classic, level-building, fighting hoards of minions fantasy game. This is almost the complete antithesis of Vhallan and I am finding that thinking of SW is screwing up my thought process for SSΩ. I could adapt Vhallan to SW, but the inspiration I had was for D&D-style magic and not the Castle Falkenstein-style magic I wanted for Vhallan. SW has also derailed my plans to continue the M&M campaign next year. Oh, why does my brain have to be so fickle?

Then again, I had a similar urge with BESM about this time last year. Autumn always makes me think about D&D. Or just roleplaying in general. I think it has to do with memories from school when I'd walk over to my friend's house to play and autumn has that special smell to it (probably because summer is so dry that it lacks any smell until the rains start, signaling the start of fall). Ultimately, I became dissatisfied with BESM, though I still have a fondness for the game, and a D&D-ish campaign never developed beyond a one-shot game at Kublacon last year. We shall have to see if SW holds up better.

There may be a review of SW next month, but no promises.

Comments

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Myles Corcoran

I thought the guidelines were 500 words *per encounter*, which essentially translates into 500 words *per room*, not 500 words for the entire thing. Perhaps Mark can straighten me out.

I structured the 4 sessions like a pilot to a television series. It was designed to *introduce* the PCs, not to have character development. By the end, they had mastered their powers, saved the world, and triggered the creation of numerous new superhumans that will be featured in the ongoing series. I did not require any backstory beyond what was required for the questionnaire.

Robert A Dushay PhD

Often, the issue is not whether or not an action is unethical, but rather if it has the *perception* of impropriety. I would rather avoid a conflicts of interest than try to explain away the apparent conflict.

Lee Gold

Since the PCs were sent to an alternate reality that had been terraformed by aliens, I have not had to nail down Devon's climate. :)

Spike Y Jones

I have only played in a couple D&D campaigns, and they were low level, but I do not think it ever took more than 3 encounters to increase a level. The 13.3 encounters per level seems off.

One way to give someone a fishing skill without other survival-based skills is do Profession: Fisher.

Did Gary Gygax have anything to do with Castle & Crusades? The authors are listed as Davis Chenault & Mac Golden.

Paul Mason

The Forge sees following Edwards mantra of "the system does matter" which I think is as false as saying "the rules don't matter." Sometimes they do and sometimes they do not. Overtly making the rules matter by shoving them into the players' faces is not good game design.

I agree completely regarding your take on appropriate dialog and how to encourage it non-mechanically. "Parlour gamery" is an example of what I mean by overt rules.

While loss of player control (or rather, the player asking the dice "how should I roleplay this?") is appropriate in some cases, I fail to see how it is necessary or desirable for all games.

On RPGnet, someone wrote of the new WoD system handling a Firefly game, "The virtue, vice and degeneration mechanic would be good at modeling the moral struggle the characters go through over the course of the show." My reaction was "why don't you just roleplay?" Do I need the game to tell me what my character's internal moral struggles are? Maybe some players want the game to tell them how to feel and act because they lack the ability or desire to do so on their own.

Being identified "veteran gamer" and not as an "actor," would be inappropriate only if other veteran gamers were identified by their chosen professions.

Brian Misiaszek

Your aptitude at crafting marvelous mauve phraseology is truly breathtaking. Infant poultry indeed! What percentage of the tone and detail is conveyed within the game itself and its players rather than the skill and artistic license of the narrator?

I was actually a contributor to RPGnet back in the

day and I have the t-shirt to prove it. :) My activity level in the forum is directionally proportional to my boredom level at work. As you can see, I have been pretty bored. :)

Lisa Padol

For some reason I cannot understand, the goals I set for my characters rarely involve advancement of abilities. I wanted Ingrid to find happiness in a relationship (after a very long and bumpy journey). I want my mentalist in the DC Heroes campaign to defeat his nemesis and to rid himself of his demons.

The depth and breadth of Captain Picard and the other Starfleet officers exceeded my threshold of disbelief in Star Trek. A starship captain might go over a decade without having to maneuver in zero gee and is probably not very good at it compared to people whose job it is to do such things.

I think OTE is easier to calibrate than D&D, et al. Without all the fiddly modifiers and abilities, you can easily see how effective PCs will be based on different situations they find themselves in. Plus, you can calibrate on the fly in a way you cannot do with more rigid systems.

Simon Reeve

Most of of Blueberry Valley, are taken from my own experience in Northern California. The stream, including the bobcat, squirrels, ducks, and boars (actually, wild pigs) are from Coyote Creek that runs behind my workplace. I have wanted to run B&B since seeing the rabbits (though they were probably hares) running around the open areas of Lawrence-Livermore Laboratory when I worked there. The only thing British about the entire adventure is my choice of names for Truffle brothers (and the fact I played them as British). Neither truffles nor wild blueberries are really appropriate for Northern California, but they are found in North America.

Brian Rogers

Profit sharing is an excellent means of giving bonuses for making the company more profitable. Unfortunately, the way my past companies have done it is biased and lame. 1) Profit sharing should give the same amount to every worker, regardless of salary (though I can see part timers getting a smaller bonus). 2) The percentage should be fixed and not altered year-to-year. But then I believe in the notion that if the company treats the workers well, they will do well for the company.

I did not care for Auberon's explanation of faeries, and I happily ignore it. I *refuse* to nail down the nature of faeries in Vhallan.