

Recommended website: www.despair.com
Adversity, Despair, and Conformity are my favorites.

new email

I changed my email address (see below). I am just tired of using AOL and will be closing my account by the end of November. My web site is down until I find a new home for it and create something that I think is worthwhile.

anachronisms

The first few episodes of *Gene Roddenberry's Andromeda* have aired and while the show has some promise, I am put off by the anachronisms. The captain (played by Kevin Starbo) and other members of the crew speak of things like basketball, Harley Davidsons, and 20th century battle tactics like they are they were from the late 20th century themselves, despite being 300 years after the fall of the thousands-year-old Commonwealth of Planets. In *Farscape*, it works when John Crichton says such things, because a) he is from the late 20th century and b) no one else has any clue what he is talking about and assumes he is mentally unstable.

Since we are all beings of the late 20th century, having such anachronisms helps the audience identify with the characters and gives the writers some frame of reference. As roleplayers, anachronisms are par for the course, with modern speech slipping into every setting and time-period. Though we try to get our thous, thees, and forsooths in line, it happens. One way around this issue is to accept it and work the campaign around it. This approach can work for fantasy and historical settings, but I think that SF would be more natural and less contrived.

The PCs could be modern or slightly futuristic characters who get transported to the future. Suspended animation (*Buck Rogers* (from the 80s), *Futurama*, and at least one episode of *ST:TNG*) and near-light relativistic effects work well for this. While this type of scenario might work great for a campaign, I do not see it as a commercial game setting, as it makes limiting assumptions about allowable PCs.

If you cannot bring the Earthlings to the aliens, bring the aliens to Earth. *Alien Nation* (movie and television series) or *ST: First Contact* (minus WW3) are ways to introduce science-fiction themes with modern-day characters. I envision a campaign where friendly aliens visit Earth, accept them into their

interstellar community, and within a generation, humans have spread out from Earth to the stars. Such a campaign could take place on an Earth transformed (for better or worse) by alien contact and technology or off-Earth where humans are seen as the newbie aliens with their funny speech and out-of-place cultural references.

ignorable theme

issue #304

Limiting the players' freedom to create PCs

Except in most chaotic settings, such as Nexus or the Marvel universe, there have to be some restrictions on character types, even if the restrictions are as broad as "sentient being capable of communication with the other characters."

Restrictions are good. They help frame the creative process and give it form. In my experience, players often take a long time to come up with a character inspiration when the options are limitless. I have seen this happen with OTE, Everway, GURPS, Champions, and even Call of Cthulhu. This is one of the two biggest hurdles I have when starting a campaign – not giving players enough of a framework for creating characters.

Classes work well for this. Classes promote quick character design and filling a role (playing the fighter or the thief, frex) within the game. The problem with classes occurs when you want to break out of the pre-defined molds or when the classes have their own restrictions that break suspension of disbelief.

Some GM-imposed limitation are perfectly reasonable if you can see things from that side of the GM screen. Everway's restriction against mind-control type powers is a perfectly reasonable thing, even though there is no setting-based reason for it. Superhero games tend to warn against "loner" characters. Though these characters are well defined in the genre(s) of comic books, they are not necessarily appropriate for a roleplaying campaign.

In our online games, most of the character restrictions were to facilitate the setup of the campaign. In Matt's *Law and Order* game, the PCs had to be NYC police detectives – if they were not, then there was not much point in playing the campaign. In Sigma Gamma Xi, the PCs had to be graduate students to get them to the seminar that kicked off the game.

Some players just do not understand that there have to be some restrictions. In a hard SF campaign, you cannot play a mage; in a superhero campaign,

you cannot play a villain. Most reasonable players will accept these kind of limitations.

Some GMs are too willing to let whiney players have their way and unbalance the campaign for everyone else. Other GMs impose limitations after the character is already created or reject a character based on restrictions that were not at first stated. Most reasonable GMs know how to negotiate and communicate with players so that they do not feel their creative freedoms are being squashed.

comments

issue #302

comics

I second Grumer's and Gilham's comments and recommendations of *Promethea* and *Powers*, respectively, and continue to tout *Usagi*.

patrick brady

Learning: I found your essay interesting, though I think learning is one of those things that can never be adequately simulated in game terms. Ultimately, I think, the GM has to resort to out-of-character mechanics (experience or character points) or drop back and punt ("... after three months of intensive training..."). Spike's comments last issue on this topic were right on the mark.

In an interview on the DVD of *Taxi Driver*, Jodie Foster tells how she and Robert De Niro rehearsed one of their scenes so many times that it became utterly boring. At that point, he started improvising. The freedom of having the scene drilled into her mind made the improvisation constructive. The same philosophy would seem to apply to the use of martial skills and improvisation.

Amber assumes that Amberites can always find a slow-time shadow and tune their skills for years between scenes. I do not particularly care for this idea, but there it is.

avram grumer

Strength in RPGs: When I think about it, I can only recall a few instances when a character's strength ever mattered to a campaign. Even these had only to do with how much damage a punch could do rather than lifting strength.

Warren Ellis: I also think that Ellis gets into "ain't my characters cool" mode too often. In *Transmet*, his best moments as a writer are when he gets inside the characters and beyond Spider's coolness and attitude. I would really like to see Ellis focus more story arcs on the Filthy Assistants. Ellis would be insufferable as a roleplayer, I think.

spike y jones

Non-Human Races: The non-human races in *Lace & Steel* have no special role in the history or culture of the game world. They add color, to be sure, but a campaign can have plenty of color without them. In *Castle Falkenstein*, a GM who wants to use the Second Compact as a part of the campaign needs to have the faerie races, but otherwise, they are easily ignored for similar reasons.

Star Wars and Phantom Menace: I doubt Lucas had a target audience for *Star Wars* other than himself. If you take *The Phantom Menace* as a stand-alone film, it would probably work as well as *Star Wars*, if not better. If it had been released first, I would be complaining about how bad *Star Wars* is rather than the other way around. The plot from *Phantom* is so similar to the other three movies that either Lucas really did not have anything more to offer or he is trying to make a statement about the cyclic nature of history, the force, or whatever.

Pascal's Wager: Pascal would have been disappointed if he discovered that the qualifications of Paradise are moral conviction and intellectual honesty. In choosing faith based on having "nothing to lose," he lost both of these. If he really did not truly believe (in his heart) and was only "hedging his bet", then he was not being honest to himself, his fellow Christians, or to God. This might piss-off God more than being an atheist. That's my wager, anyway.

joshua kronengold

Cliffhangers: WEG's *Star Wars* rpg suggested that GMs kick off games in the middle of a cliffhanger with a short script to get the game rolling. RTal's *Dreampark* rpg suggesting kicking off adventures by thrusting PCs into life-threatening predicaments. I think this would be ideal for convention games, though I have yet to use it myself. I tend to start games slowly, too slowly at times.

Action Games and Movies: With many games, there is often a huge gap between the way games are intended to be played and the way they are actually played. *Mage: TA* is a great game for power-gamers and rule lawyers, for instance. When the masses pick up games based on action movies, they more often than not equate "action" with "combat." Roleplaying becomes tertiary to beating up NPCs and advancing characters to beat up ever more powerful NPCs.

Favors: I recently read the first three books of Brust's *Jherog* series. His world uses unspecified favors much in the way you describe.

rene a jouviere jr

Divination: Your discussion was interesting, though you failed to mention the most important aspect: the ability of the diviner to make a cold reading of the subject.

Jack of All Trades: Let's not forget Verne Troyer (Mini-Me from Austin Powers 2) as Napoleon!

mark kinney

Real Life in Al Amarja: Interesting premise. The real world *Real World* shows take weeks to edit to their broadcast form, so any secret plans the PCs might discuss in the house would not be broadcast immediately. However, if you went with a more real-time broadcast, like *The Truman Show* or *Ed TV*, it might keep things interesting. One element you did not exploit is that the cameras would follow the cast members even when they leave the house.

brian misiaszek

Fantasy Detectives: Usagi Yojimbo featured a story arc with a town inspector who enlisted our hero's support in solving a crime. Though this individual was a town official and not a private investigator, it certainly would fit into the "detective" vocation for a fantasy pulp game. Another example would be the Connery character, William of Baskerville, in *Name of the Rose*.

patrick seymour

Welcome to the A&E and the Confusing Patricks Club. I often notice that comments to me get sent to Patrick Brady (as were Jonathan Tweet's in Noteworthy Reaction #n+4) or the reverse.

comments

issue #303

patrick brady

Designing Really Strange Aliens: All the more reason to encourage animation, where alien anatomy is not tied to human. In that same vein, animated adaptations of comic books are far more appropriate than live-action movies.

robert dushay

Rick's chronicler Kate: Perhaps she is a friend of Rick's from his school days. They are "just friends" because, frankly, she intimidates him. Kate is someone who cares for him yet he is too fearful of meaningful relationships (and the loss of emotional control he feels when he gets close to someone) to think of her romantically. So Kate waits, giving Rick a place of refuge from his superficial relationships,

until he matures enough to realize that the person he truly loves is sitting right beside him.

Character Hooks: The problem with providing unused hooks to give characters depth is when the player latch onto hooks that are not used in the current adventure. Players may be disappointed and feel cheated.

paul mason

Fun vs Serious: The US, especially outside the original 13 colonies, has little sense of history. We have a tradition of media manipulation and romanticizing facts. We perceive history not as the way it was but as the way it should have been. The so-called Wild West, including gun slingers, the pony express, and other romantic icons, is mostly a fiction created by pulp authors, hack journalists, and screen writers. Compare the popularity of Deadlands with any other rpg set in this time period. That's my take on it, anyway.

ESP Weighted Unfairly in Favor of Players: Good point, sir! The only solution that comes to mind is for the GM to "unfairly" thwart PC plans. Players: "There is no way they would have put a contingent of guards there." GM: "Yes there is."

steve gilham

Stuff: I agree with you completely and share your sentiments on the differences between 2nd and 3rd edition classes.

richard iorio ii

I very much enjoyed the preamble. The key is having players who are patient with newbies and encourage their participation.

rene a louviere jr

Thanks for the examples of non-violently defeating villains, even if the tactics were, as you pointed out, morally questionable.

eugene reynolds

Feats of Strength: Shame on you for criticizing Champions for using comic-book reality.

jim vassilakos

Games Unplugged: I am put off by the attitude of this magazine. It reads like a house-organ for Dynasty Presentations and their friends.

Pyramid: It covers much more than just GURPS. When I read it, there was plenty of support of In Nomine, other SJG games, and games from other publishers, including non-rpgs.