

here comes the rain

Every year, I can summarize DunDraCon (www.dundracon.com) this way: we played games, we had fun, it rained. This year was no exception. I had been traveling on business the week before, so I was a bit tired going into the three-and-a-half day weekend, but I survived. The dealers' room expanded this year, but rather than make the traditional room bigger, they split off a couple of the dealers to a different room. Open gaming was fairly sparse in the mornings but was overflowing by the afternoons. Bad luck kept me out of games on Saturday, but the games I did play were very enjoyable.

ingorable themes and con report

As promised last issue, here is my take on the ingorable theme of issue 307 as well as my report on the games I played at DunDraCon. I will also talk about some of the unpleasant gaming experiences I have had, which coincides with the ingorable theme of issue 308.

the good

This year, I played in three good games. The first was a BESM¹ game that could have been really bad. The pre-generated characters had no background. The "plot" was nothing more than three independent encounters that the GM wanted the PCs to face. There was minimal investigation and almost no NPC-interaction. Each lame-brained plan thought up by the PCs succeeded in getting to the encounter. A few times during the game, I found myself putting on my GM hat to help explain rules and move the game along. The game was highly enjoyable, however, because of the players. We joked and laughed a lot and we had fun.

The next game was a D&D3 game (my first game with the new edition) that was part of the GM's regular campaign. He had run this adventure many times before and it showed. The plot was very loosely structured in a way that allowed the PCs to latch onto plot hooks or ignore them without derailing the adventure. The NPCs were hilarious and the GM was very entertaining. The group of player- and GM-supplied characters (accidentally comprised of 5

halflings, 3 humans, and a dwarf) was quite silly and much fun was had by all.

The last game was more serious. Though most of us were new to the TORG setting and rules, the GM did a good job explaining them, including two pages summarizing the background and rules. The pre-generated characters had one-page backgrounds including notes about the other PCs. This is *exactly* the kind of preparation that tells me the GM is on the ball. I have used this technique to great effect., especially with a group of pre-generated PCs who supposedly have worked together before. Just two or three sentences describing each character really helps in the roleplaying between players. In my BESM game, the characters quickly picked up the fact that even the description of the same character-defining event differed, depending on whose character sheet you read.

The adventure itself relied heavily on investigation and NPC-interaction. The characters were a well rounded group and the players roleplayed them well. Three of the PCs, including mine, had subplots that were addressed in the game. These could easily have been ignored in the game, but provided wonderful roleplaying opportunities. My only quibble from a GM-perspective is that while I immensely enjoyed my subplot with another PC,² the other PCs might have felt left-out. As it was, the players and GM other players did a great job and it was the most enjoyable game of the convention.

The game I ran at the convention, a modern-day BESM game, also went really well. The greatest difficulty was a young (early or pre-teen) player who chose to play the pre-generated Interpol agent who was also a gun bunny. A few times, I had to give him the "don't say what your character is saying, just say it" lesson in roleplaying. With help from the other players, who provided ideas and support, he got through the challenge of playing the character. He give me the complement that while I was playing an NPC, he forgot I was the GM. He also seemed to be impressed with the level of roleplaying of the other players, so we may have shown him *the way*. :)

Though I was not 100% satisfied with the plot and how I ran the game, everyone came away happy. As an added benefit, the game boosted my confidence enough to get me out the GMing funk I have been in for the past two years. I am already thinking of ideas for next year or even an ongoing campaign.

¹ Big Eyes, Small Mouth. I figured that since I was running a BESM game on Sunday, it would be a good idea to have played the game at least once. :)

² Played by the same Todd Furler mentioned in Lisa's zine last issue. Lisa, do you have any contact information for him? We should try to get him into A&E.

the bad

With everything that could go wrong with a convention game, it is amazing that any of them are any good. Here are a few common flaws that I have encountered through the years.

GMs who simply go through the motions without putting forth the prerequisite effort make for boring games. Lack of preparation shows. A friend I met at the convention complained of a GM who, after arriving late, said he needed an hour-and-a-half (of an eight-hour game) to prepare. Even in a freeform, "do what you want" game, the GM has to have good knowledge of the settings and characters. The key to winging it is not making it seem like you are winging it. As a GM, know your limitations and prepare appropriately.

Ideally, a game should engage the players through their characters. This provides a challenge to GMs who do not use pre-generated characters. With player-supplied characters, you can run into the "why am I doing this?" problem. If there are no plot hooks or character hooks for the players, GMs have to rely on out-of-game elements (player wisecracks and unintended humor being most common) to make the game interesting. If these elements do not come into play, the game drags on and players may actually walk out.

The last time I walked out of a game was because the GM allowed too many players to enter the game and allowed a select few to dominate the action. By the time I left, I had spent a half-hour being ignored and doing nothing. Several players had already left by the time I did. I once ran a freeform, "pick a plot" game in my first years of GMing at conventions, and it suffered from similar "spotlight" problems complicated by my efforts to wing it. A few players really enjoyed it, but most lost interest.

Some plots, like a dungeon crawl, which may appeal to some of the players, but others may be disappointed, uninspired, and bored. This is where the game description becomes important. If you sign up for a CoC game expecting investigation but get an *Aliens*-esque bug-hunt, you are not likely to give the game a favorable review.

In one Champions game, the description billed it as an investigation and roleplaying oriented adventure and asked for 250 point characters. I designed a character before the game based on subtlety (illusions with some telekinesis). The game ended up being a slugfest with the GM's regular players (who had not officially signed up for the game and showed up with characters built on several hundred points) taking center stage. My character was particularly ineffective, as was the other moderately powered mentalist.

Lastly, nothing ruins a game faster than irritating players. We all know the signs: GM-hogging, stupid or tired jokes, describing characters outside the game, and doing things that are dumb and out-of-character (doubly so if they are directed toward you or your PC). Sometimes the GM can help, but most of the time you just have to suffer.

merits

prepared GM
interesting roleplaying
opportunities
good players

flaws

unprepared GM
no roleplaying
opportunities
bad players

comments

issue 307

timeslots

Some stories (for lack of a better term) are best told in four hours, in the same way that a short story may be more appropriate than a novel. Humorous games are especially suited to four hours. Some stories, especially investigations, need more time to develop and play-out. At four-hours, some plots are shallow and trite with no time for character exploration, red herrings, or subplots.

Four-hour games are good in that they allow you to play in more different games during a convention. Also, if the game is below-par, you only have to wait four hours for the next one. On the other hand, if the game is good, four hours can be way too short – just when you are settled in and really enjoying the game, it ends.

GenCon and Origins do allow eight- and twelve-hour games, but when I last ran an eight-hour game, half the players assumed it was only four hours and it threw a wrench into their schedules. At DunDraCon, four-hour games are rare; six-, eight-, and twelve-hour games are typical.

collie collier

Glad to see you finally made it into A&E! I had not heard of the incident at DeAnza. I am thankful you missed that particular date with destiny.

myles corcoran

The card-based Marvel Adventure game from TSR had themes like you describe. Pulling out a few, I see "Cunning Scheme," "Help From Above," "Sacrifice," and "Structural Collapse." These were on cards that featured the Green Goblin, Archangel, Adam Warlock, and Juggernaut, respectively.

richard iorio ii

I agree with your assessment of *Phantom Menace* and that BESM would make a good system for Star Wars.

I see no problem with Divine Relationship (which is really just luck and is appropriate for Jedi's once you change the name) or Flunkies (droids might also qualify as flunkies).

Characters can have kensai – you've just renamed it and restricted it to lightsabers. :) Since Luke was learning blind fighting before he learned how to make his own lightsaber, I would not require the first level of Jedi Combat Training to building a lightsaber.

Can characters buy Force Powers without using the Force Sub-Attribute? I would say not, except for race-based abilities. Jedi Precognition as written does not work if it is dependent upon activation through the Force Sub-Attribute.

Why did you complicate Telekinesis? At the risk of sounding like a Champions player, Choke should probably be written up as a separate Weapon/Special Attack rather than a special effect of Telekinesis.

mark kinney

Skeptics need not conduct the experiments so long as the experiments are double-blind and the results (raw data and procedures) made public for review. The simple fact is that those who claim to possess paranormal abilities can create whatever lame-ass excuse they want.

paul mason

I too have been thinking about many of the issues surrounding the fantasy genre you discussed. I am currently trying to start an online campaign that draws on the folklore and fairy tale view of goblins, trolls, ogres, and things that go bump in the night. I do not want modern gaming sentiment of ecology and sociology to influence my view of the world and the creatures that live there. On the other hand, I do not want them to be cardboard figures whose only purpose is to be knocked down. I do not want goblins to have a culture, but I want them to have personality. I want trolls to be colorful, nasty characters who live under bridges, not a "realistic" creature, and certainly not the ridiculous trolls of D&D.

Also, your analysis of the Star Trek aliens exactly matches mine, but as you say, it is not a discussion that gets you very far.

jonathan nicholas

At conventions, I purposely seek out games that are new to me, but only if I think I might enjoy them. Different just to be different leads to disappointment. I avoid new games that require me to bring my own character. I have good luck with Call of Cthulhu and Castle Falkenstein at conventions, where the chances of getting a GM whose style I like is much higher than Champions or D&D.

naomi rivkis

I prefer convention games with pre-generated characters. If done correctly, juicy character development is built into the characters and explored during the game.

If the PCs get so powerful that only the government can pose a threat, are you saying they are the only individuals in the world of that power level? Surely there are other groups of NPCs with their own agendas that can challenge the PCs.

jonathan tweet

Designing a quest to cure an ailing PC is too convenient? <sarcasm>God forbid the GM actually provide the kind of adventure the players actually want.</sarcasm> Why would you want to place a hardship on the *players* anyway? What is the difference between killing a PC before resurrection was available (something you did) and a killing a PC who cannot be resurrected (something you avoided)?

jim vassilakos

Contrary to what Dr. Wang's website may say, let me pull up one from The Straight Dope (www.straightdope.com/mailbag/mphasevel.html). "The experiments that show these so-called faster-than-light velocities are showing the predicted phase-velocity effect well known to all students of relativity." Anyone claiming otherwise is doing a disservice to the public.

Gravity does not exactly follow an inverse-square law; there is a one-over-distance factor in there as well. It's existence is predicted by General Relativity and agrees with observation. Not only does gravity have infinite range, it has no barriers, unlike electric fields that can be blocked by a conductive shell.

Game designers only get themselves in trouble when they try too hard to explain these kinds of things. I have a masters degree and I refuse to even try – fluffy explanations are perfectly fine for me. I defer most physics comments to Steve Gilham.