

I have switched to Earthlink as my ISP. My "official" email is unchanged (see below), but xenongames@earthlink.net also works (it is forwarded to the altavista.com address).

I have tentatively created a new web page (see footer). All I have at the moment are some of my past zines. I kept copies of my A&E zines for the last 30 issues. I was disappointed to discover that several of the original Word documents were unreadable, but since I cannot think of a good reason to even have these around, I guess it is no great loss.

ignorable theme

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being in character

Was this igttheme intended to address the physical act of being in character (speaking as if you were your character) or acting within the confines of a character's defined personality? I feel like touching on both.

In my current D&D group, I am making a very conscious effort to stay in character as much as possible; this way, I hope to distract myself from the lackluster and frustrating GM style. By quirky coincidence, both the halfling rogue and human paladin have experience as professional cooks—the former as a ship's cook, the later as the son of a chef. We often have in-character discussions about food and its preparation. While we never let it interfere with the adventure or tone of the campaign, aside from the occasional joking plea to use cooking as a positive combat modifier, I get the sense that the GM does not know what to do with two players who actually roleplay outside the context of the adventure.

Being in character can cause confusion, especially when the character voice and player voice sound the same. I confused the Paladin's player when I said, "I have eaten rat before." On the first evening we played, my in-character wheezing and coughing for several minutes (my character had suffered a chest wound) was misinterpreted as a need for the player to get a glass of water.

There can be a danger in "being on" too much, when the roleplaying takes a backseat to hamming it up and mugging for attention. The third player in the D&D game is the GM's girlfriend, who is assertive in saying what her character is doing but is not an assertive roleplayer. I do not want her to feel like I am

trying to upstage her; I want her to roleplay more, not less.

Whenever possible, in-character explanations should be used for out-of-character decisions. Sure, you as a player may know the room is a trap, but is there a reason your character might think so? This should not mean that your character has to have a reason for you to order pizza. Perhaps the most annoying roleplayers are those who refuse to ever leave character. Any innocent out-of-game comment like "I'm going to the snack bar; you want a soda?" is greeted with derision or obnoxious in-character comments like "I know not of these 'snack bar' or 'so-da.'"

Anytime a player says, "my character would not do that," I wonder. Is it a legitimate claim, is the player just using it as an excuse not to do something the player does not want to do, is the player just being obstinate, or is it some combination? Players, just like GMs, can be control freaks with no ability or desire to be reasonable or compromising. Some players hide behind "in character" to shield them from the ramifications of their obnoxious and disruptive behavior.

Ideally, the player should be flexible in defining what is "in character" and what is "out of character" to make the game as a whole more enjoyable. We expect the GM to develop the game world and NPCs with an eye towards what is fun and interesting for players and PCs. Why cannot we ask the same of the players?

A technique I try to employ is to define my character's personality by what my character actually does and says in the game and not use strictly what is written down on the character sheet. If, during the course of the game, your character does something that might be considered out of character, redefine the character to fit this new behavior. Maybe the character is changing the way real people do. Maybe it is a recently uncovered aspect of the character's personality. Maybe the behavior is consistent when you fill in some more background. For example, in Matt Helms' SGX campaign, I discovered Bruce had a fear of abandonment that had kept his previous relationships focused on sex without any true emotional attachments.

It often takes several sessions for players to feel out a character and find the right voice and personality. Some roleplayers like to keep skill points in reserve, to allocate them as they are needed. A character's personality should be treated the same way.

In an effort to adapt the fantasy feel of Castle Falkenstein to a medieval fantasy setting, I ordered *The Memoirs of Auberon of Faerie* and *The Book of Sigils* from Wizards' Attic. Though these supplements are out of print, Wizard's Attic still had new copies. They arrived in the same envelope, but *Sigils* came with the spine broken horizontally, but whether this was caused by UPS or was put into the padded envelope that way I do not know.¹ Each book is \$17 and 128 pages. Neither has an index.

the memoirs of auberon of faerie

Memoirs is one-third historical account and one-half field guide, leaving one-sixth for GM-tips and miscellany. The history aspect details the experiences of Faerie across five alternative Earth's that reminded me of both Zelazny's *Amber* and Brust's *To Reign In Hell*. Some may be inspired by this treatment, others may be put off; I was neither. I thought too much effort was spent trying to rationalize why faerie act and look the way they do, but others may find this section more useful or plausible than I did. The basic rationale is the fey copied humans they saw on the First Earth they visited. So why are some fey scared off by inverted clothing or bells? Partly because fey wrap their identity around a mode of behavior and lack the imagination to act differently than they have for eons. There are also useful tips on how playing faeries is not just like playing people with pointy ears.

The field guide was more useful and the primary reason I bought the book. I appreciate the tone of the descriptions, which present faerie as a type of very diverse people with alien motivations and not simply monsters to be dispatched by PCs. As with the rest of Castle Falkenstein, it has few mechanics and focuses mainly on description rather than hard-and-fast rules. Its primary fault, I feel, is the characterization of too many things as faerie and not a different kind of supernatural creature or phenomena.²

Overall though, the treatment of hobs, brownies, dryads, and dozens of others seem much more natural and alive than their descriptions in D&D and other fantasy rpgs. The illustrations are vivid and interesting, though they may jar with some people's expectation (some, especially the unseele, drift into Whispering

¹ I was not in the mood to complain to Wizard's Attic, but I'm passing the gripe/warning on to you.

² Dracula is a human-faerie hybrid? Eww.

Vault territory). *Memoirs* is a handy guide with its heart in the right place.

the book of sigils

Frankly, *The Book of Sigils* was a waste of money. At least half the book is a fictional narrative, which is fine if you like this kind of thing, I suppose. I found it highly improbable and ultimately without substance. Between this and art, *Sigils* is two-thirds uninspired filler.

One of the things I want a supplement like this to accomplish is compile a bunch of information and save me a day or two at the library. The narrative breaks up the description of various mystical lodges, clubs, cabals, and secret organizations that populate the Falkenstein world. *Sigils* spends no more than a page describing each organization and many only get a paragraph. *Sigils* describes organizations in Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia, but none are given adequate attention. While there are some good tidbits, I was not inspired by any of them, but then I was more interested in spells and magical atmosphere I could transport into my game.

Castle Falkenstein uses a very loose magical system where spell descriptions may only be a sentence long; players add duration, target, area of effect, etc. at the time the spell is cast. The spell description is really just the special effect, to steal a Champions-ism. The spells in *Sigils* were okay, I guess; I do not know if they were just unimaginative or just not what I wanted. The last pages have useful GM information on creating custom spells, curses and hexes, and sorcerous duels ala *Ars Magica's* certámen.³

However, the most unforgivable part of *Sigils* was the layout and design. Black text on gray background, varying font sizes in an effort to squeeze articles into a page, chapters only a few pages long, and gray-on-gray graphics are just a sampling of the crimes committed by Mark Schumann.⁴ I was tempted to send a copy to Paul Mason in the same reflex that causes people to say "you gotta smell this—it's terrible."

Sigils fails on content and presentation. I cannot express strongly enough my disappointment and dissatisfaction with this product. It is a waste of shelf-space.

³ Why do they spell it "certámen" when Latin had no "á" character (or even lower-case)?

⁴ He also has "with help of" credits in *Memoirs*.

industry news

Arthaus is going to “revamp” Ravenloft. Funny.

paul cardwell

Would John Tynes’ recent *Salon* article count as a positive or negative portrayal of gaming?

myles corcoran

I felt Amber did a good job describing how to vary the focus of combat, based on relative skill levels or dramatic importance. It also illustrates how the focus of the fight itself can change as combatants try to emphasize their strengths (endurance vs. agility vs. physical power).

spike y jones

I liked the lubin; it would fit in well with Castle Falkenstein. I think you do it an injustice to call it “April Foolish.” With horns, a tail, and a goat-like beard, do they also resemble a satyr from the waist down?

To maintain my personal suspension of disbelief, I assume that all ST words come through a universal translator (even if they aren’t consistent about it). What comes out of the translator is not 20th century American English, but Federation “common” which includes words and phrases from English, other Earth-based languages (like Hindi), and non-Earth languages. Another way to look at it is to imagine how many foreign words English will have borrowed by the 24th century. “Ferengi” is just a translation, chosen because it was a best-fit. “Curzon” is picked out of a Federation baby name book. I do not claim this is a supportable argument—it isn’t—it is just my personal delusion.

Nighthift publishes a d20 super-hero game called *The Foundation*. I read a free preview and was unimpressed and have not read any favorable reviews.

Your split of core versus non-body damage is so reminiscent of Hero’s Body vs. Stun damage, you could define Magic Missile as a RKA and Fireball as an AoE EB.

The term censorship carries different connotations depending on context. Besides censorship by the government, where a law or agency prevents the dissemination of particular ideas or speech, there are other kinds or censorship.

- private (MTV not showing the latest Madonna video or blurring out cannabis leaves);
- economic (a candidate who cannot afford tv or print ads or even publish fliers);
- self (not printing something you think may offend others or may get you in trouble); and
- editorial (you know this one well, I’d imagine), to name a few

Being ignored by the media, for whatever reason, is a form of censorship—just a form of censorship that does not violate the 1st Amendment. Maybe we need a less loaded word than “censored.”

rene a louviere jr

If you make a claim, the burden of proof is on *you* to prove it. The more remarkable the claim, the more compelling the evidence must be. This is the origin of “innocent until proven guilty;” the state, claiming you are guilty of a crime, must prove it. If someone says, “I can bend spoons with my mind,” your natural reaction is to say, “prove it.” To prove guilt or the paranormal, it has to be done in such a way as to preclude other suspects or causes, such as trickery. I expand upon this point in a rant, but I did not want to seem as if I am attacking your or your beliefs, so I put it at the end of this zine.

Quantitatively explain the disadvantage in saying someone is 100 kg instead of 220 lbs or 160 cm instead of 5’ 3”?

chris murray

I agree that real evil is not fun. When a gaming acquaintance started a supervillain campaign, I told another player that I would be tempted to create a mentalist who used his powers solely to abuse children. Evil is icky.



mark nemeth

I too was initially attracted to the atmosphere (though I am not sure that is the right word) of the Monster Manual, dungeons, etc. I remember rolling up intelligent swords not because they were powerful, but because they were so cool. Sometimes I still get a twinge of “this is so cool,” but nothing that would qualify as a sense of wonder and nothing about D&D3 makes me feel that way.

simon reeve

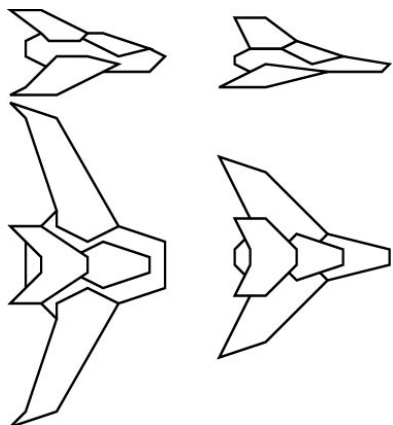
There are many “connect two ends of the board” games, including the modern classics Hex and Twixt. I found no reference to “Brainwave” in the Luding database, but the game you mention sounds a lot like Water Works. One of the challenging aspects of Ta Yü is that there are no simple “cap this route” tiles.

Cecil Adams addresses the seven day week issue at http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a2_166.html

Anytime someone mentions something like “evolved metabolic adaptations,” I tend to think it is due more to individual adaptation caused by continuous exposure, such as being fed a particular diet since birth. There are metabolic differences that trend along racial lines, such as alcohol and lactose intolerance in Asians. However, I would need to see more detailed evidence before I jumped to the assumption that evolution is at work.

jim vassilakos

Too many players escalate intra-party conflicts to violence when in-character ostracism would be more appropriate. Rather than kill Ziggy’s character, the other PCs could have kicked the character out. When Ziggy comes with a new character, the party can decide whether to accept the new character or say, “sorry, not interested.” Ziggy should get the hint after several new PCs are not allowed into the party.



rant

burden of proof

Too often, people who claim to be “open minded⁵” immediately jump to the belief that something is the result of the supernatural or paranormal. The whole point of scientific investigation is to narrow down the possibilities by designing experiments to weed out probable causes and get to the fundamental truths. Too many people close themselves off from the other possibilities including:

- experimental error, commonly caused by improper randomization or breaking the double-blind barrier;
- wishful thinking, corrected by proper experimental procedures, statistical analysis, and peer review;
- cold reading, employed by phone physics, mediums, and con artists; and
- outright fraud, such as performing a trick and claiming it to be some paranormal ability.

Only when all the mundane possibilities are eliminated should the experimenter reach for the extraordinary, like the supernatural, cold fusion, free energy, etc.

Alternative medicine, including dietary supplements and other over-the-counter pseudo-medical devices, fall into the same pitfalls. Wishful thinking, faulty experimentation, pseudo-science, and the “prove it doesn’t work” mentality drain billions of dollars from people’s pockets each year. If you claim your feng shui can cure my ills, you should have to prove it.

And don’t tell me “it couldn’t hurt,” either, especially if you want me to put it in my body. I do not care if it is “all natural”—there are plenty of natural things that are extremely deadly. A great many people have died because they chose alternative medicines over modern medical therapies. Even if it is harmless to my body, it hurts my wallet when I buy a placebo. This is not to say that all alternative medicines are snake oil, but their validity needs to be proven, not assumed.

⁵ While they deride skeptics for being “close minded.”