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I had been playing around with the idea of having my own domain name, but did not bother because I just could not justify the cost. However, when I changed ISPs again, I had to move my web page off Earthlink. Not wanting to use an ad-based<sup>1</sup> redirect service, I registered the domain name and got free web hosting was a way to keep the web page location stable.

## ignorable theme

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### game system and gaming style

Unfortunately, I do not think my GMing style changes based on the game system or even the game setting. I tend to ignore game mechanics,<sup>2</sup> so I doubt they affect my style. My BESM games are much too similar to my CoC games. Most of my plots are a mystery of some sort. I have to concentrate very hard to get the right feel and mood to a game, and rarely am I able to sustain this beyond the first hour of a game as I get distracted with moving the game along. So, I just to distract the players long enough so they do not notice. : )

## ignorable theme

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### futuristic wizards and medieval scientists

I do not see the problem with these two concepts. What really distinguishes a wizard from a jedi or a Vulcan mystic? To me, wizards in *Ars Magica* are essentially scientists. In fact, there is nothing magical about the scientific method that prevents its development at an earlier date, such as by Ptolemy. In fact, this might be an interesting alternative history setting, but on the other hand, it might not change history much, if at all.

<sup>1</sup> I really, really dislike ads and commercials. I particularly hate the ads for digital cable that appear on my digital cable service. I do appreciate well-crafted, clever commercials, but I have a strict no-advertising policy when it comes to my web site.

<sup>2</sup> A result of really cutting my GM teeth (as opposed to simply dabbling) on a diceless, systemless campaign

### artificial intelligence

The film *A.I.* is real science fiction. It's not a horror movie or an action flick disguised as science fiction. *A.I.* is a fairy tale disguised as science fiction, but it is a smart, self-aware fairy tale that uses the themes of sf intelligently. *Thugs on Film*<sup>3</sup> describes it well as *Pinocchio* crossed with *Blade Runner*.

It reminds me of *2001*, another true science fiction movie—both end horribly. Both suffered from the same handicap as much speculative fiction. *A.I.* takes a great premise, explores it, and then does not know what to do with it. You can almost sense the moments the scriptwriter paused and said, "Now what?" Plus, the familiarity with the themes most of us have means that the film does not really break new ground or give us anything truly original.

For those of you who have seen *A.I.*, you know the point the story seems to take a left turn. However, I think the real misstep was fifteen minutes previous. After y'all have seen it, I will be less cryptic. *A.I.* is definitely worth seeing, but it leaves you wanting more.

### powers

For those who like crime drama, quirky dialog, and not the typical slugfest action of super hero comic books, I highly recommend *Powers*. The premise is two police detectives who investigate homicides of super-powered individuals. *Powers* is *Law & Order* meets *Astro City* and would work really well as a roleplaying campaign, especially in a setting like San Angelo.

The artwork is angled and stylized, like the recent Batman and Superman animated series, but more so. My only complaint is sometimes I cannot tell when I am supposed to read across two facing pages or read each page separately. The reviewer on [www.comicbookresources.com](http://www.comicbookresources.com) really hated the computer lettering, but I rarely notice lettering.

The first storyline, *Who Killed Retro Girl?* is available in trade paperback. Published by Image, *Powers* should be available in any decent comic book store. Issue #12, which has hand lettering, starts off a new story line, *Groupies*. Not only is it interesting, funny, and touching, but also is a great place for a new reader to start.

<sup>3</sup> <http://us.imdb.com/Games/Thugs/>

## united woes

I chose United airlines because they had the most convenient schedule and near-best prices. This was my first mistake. The flight from Chicago to Milwaukee was late departing, which was good since my flight into Chicago was late.

The ticket agent in San Jose did not check my luggage through to Milwaukee, leaving my suitcase stranded in Chicago. The remaining flights to Milwaukee were cancelled and by the time my bags did arrive, I had been wearing the same clothes for nearly 36 hours.<sup>4</sup>

On the way back, I got to the airport two hours early, waited in line for a half-hour, and was told my flight out of Milwaukee was a half-hour delayed, potentially causing me to miss my connection in Chicago. They put bunch of us on a bus to Chicago. Pulling out of the terminal, the driver discovered the bus was on empty. It took over two hours to get to Chicago.

After seeing my flight was boarding and running to the gate, I was told my plane was full and my seat given away. Booking 135 passengers for a 112 seats will do that. I managed to beg and annoy my way onto the last empty seat on the plane. Remember how they said the plane was full? Apparently not, but I was dismayed to discover my wife and stepdaughter were not on the plane.<sup>5</sup> When I arrived in San Jose, I tried to ask United which flight they were on, but stated they could not because of security reasons. Contrarily, if I had had time to check-in at Chicago, they would have told me then. Fortunately, they had taken an earlier flight.<sup>6</sup>

The last time I flew United in November, it was also through Chicago, and a two-and-a-half hour delay out of San Jose forced me to reschedule and take a red-eye. Though all my troubles, United made no attempts to recompense and never once made me feel like they cared one iota for customer satisfaction. I will never fly through Chicago nor fly United ever again.

<sup>4</sup> The drive from Chicago to Milwaukee takes only 90 minutes, yet they refused to send my bags by car.

<sup>5</sup> Especially after using this "fact" as part of my begging.

<sup>6</sup> To overcome overbooking problems, United offered them first class seats in exchange for the earlier flight, so Terri has nothing but nice things to say about them.

## games

With the convenience of the online game registration, I was able to preplan the games for the whole weekend. I concentrated on games I had not played before. For the most part, the games were enjoyable, but not remarkable. If anything, the games showed the benefit of short, four-hour timeslots.

I was intrigued by Clockworks new game, Chosen, but when I played the demo, it did not really click for me. It was too much like a cyberpunk with psionics than anything more mystical (or even mythical). I played in another Clockworks game, Asylum, and found it random, pointless, and without significant merit. Both of these were run by GMs affiliated with Clockworks.

The low-powered supers game using the Everway system could have been a lot better if the GM had managed the chaos of players in the very noisy room. However, the Everyway adaptation was done very well, I thought. I will leave the details to Josh and Lisa, who also played in it.

The Fading Suns game was an uninspired mystery / dungeon crawl adventure. This is one of those games which I might enjoy with the right GM, but not if it is restricted to wandering around and getting into firefights (even magical ones).

The Miskatonic University Class Reunion larp was fun, but suffered from too many psychic powers among the PCs. My character's goals were to make sure everything ran smoothly and to acquire artifacts for the museum. The former was thrown out the window within the first hour, but the later turned out very well thanks to rewarding looting after a combat that must have involved a dozen players. Despite having run this larp over 20 times, there were still many important omissions in some characters.<sup>7</sup>

Saturday was Fudge-day with one bunny game, run by Ann Dupuis, and one Deryni game, run by Jennifer Brinn. Both were fun, but not as filling as I had hoped.

Avis Crane, Matt Helms, and I managed to sneak in an offline session of our online campaign. I am pleased the character dynamics survived the transition, though my pacing of the game still remains terribly plodding.

That night, I did flake out of one game in order to play in a superhero game Matt ran for Avis, my friend Brian Sullivan from San Diego, and myself. This game was exceptionally fun with lots of laughter and I hope we can manage to turn it into a regular online

<sup>7</sup> Character A knows character B very well, but character B has no clue who character A is; etc.

campaign. I will leave the setting and session details for Matt to describe.

For Sunday, I had signed up for a Marvel universe game supposedly run by AEG. In actuality, it was an independent GM who was running a classic Marvel published scenario. I lost all interest at the first *deus ex machina*. At the four-hour mark, faced with the last gratuitous cosmic-level slugfest, I bowed out and went to my second Fudge Deryni game. Several other players also quit after four hours, claiming they did not realize it was a six-hour game, and so I just followed them.

The last Deryni game was odd in that I played a minimal, unexciting role with little interaction with other players yet was amazingly satisfied. After floundering for a bit, I had one of those lightbulb moments when everything clicked and my character unraveled the mystery and rectified the situation without telling anyone but one NPC what was really going on. With an hour left of the game and my character completely satisfied to the point of being smug with a job well done<sup>8</sup> and with no further reason to continue interacting with the other characters, I gracefully bowed out of the game and cruised the dealer's room one last time.

### everything else

Filling my schedule with rpgs left little room for much else. I never made it across the street to the auction hall or find where the anime room was.

Nothing in the exhibit hall really grabbed my eye. I have a half-dozen board and card games on my full bookshelves I have never or rarely played, and I had no desire to add to the depressing pile. I might have picked up *Little Fears* if I thought I would ever get to play it.

GenCon never ceases to amaze me how it screws up the little things, like not sending out pre-registration books, not placing names on badges, not placing numbers on tables, and moving an entire hall worth of games across the street because of a booking conflict with the Hilton. Except for the opportunity to play with my out-of-state friends, GenCon simply is not worth the expense or the headaches—especially if you fly United.

<sup>8</sup> Whether or not he had any right to be.

### spike y jones

Matter/anti-matter annihilation is definitely the most efficient source of energy, but creating and storing the anti-matter half of the fuel is the major obstacle to making it viable commercially or for starship propulsion. In fact, if you have to make the anti-matter, as we do today, commercial use is out of the question. Fuel for hydrogen fusion, on the other hand, is easy to find and contain.

### josh kronengold

For whatever reason, there probably is a trend toward more agnostics and atheists, as a percentage of the population, as average education and technological levels increase. I would be happy to see data refuting this. This is not to imply that more education or technology creates more non-theists, but if there is a statistical correlation, any table such as Matt's should reflect this.

### rene a louviere jr

Can you give examples of non-animist polytheism where the deities do not have assigned aspects? Being clueless about the subject matter, I am not challenging you, but just being curious.

As I mentioned before, the existence of psychic powers is a null-solution. Anything can be explained with psychic powers so if you don't go in with the assumption they don't exist, any test results can be interpreted to support psychic powers. Asking "Can psychic power X cause Y effect under Z conditions?" presupposes psychic powers. This is more damaging than assuming Y happens by some non-mystical, yet unexplained, mechanism.

Psychics who fail tests, by Randi or others, can always claim that the test was rigged against them or that the stress of the testing threw off their harmonic convergence with the universe. Can you devise a test that would prevent them from making such claims?

Should the debunkers stay away from faith healers and psychic surgeons on the basis of religion? Should the so-called power of prayer not be studied because it crosses into faith? Granted, many skeptics are self-righteous, holier-than-thou assholes, but do not condemn the thoughtful investigation and exposure of con artists hiding behind the wall of religion and faith.

My complaint with ST is not that they used technobabble to describe their technology (besides using technical and scientific terms incorrectly), but

that so many of their plot resolutions depended upon it. SW had little technobabble, but plenty of Force-babble.

### **mark nemeth**

I want complexity, depth, and sustained interest over multiple readings in my *setting*, not my *rules*. The rules and all their nuances should be clear from the first reading. It is frustrating when someone says, “I just reread and rules and discovered we were playing incorrectly.”

### **jonathan nicholas**

I liked your concept of Ego loss translating to insanity, though I do not think it fits the classic superhero comic book paradigm. On the other hand, the tone of your campaign seems to deviate from four-color comics, so it fits.

### **paul mason**

I typically use a very liberal definition of what qualifies as art—even wacky improvisational games.

### **simon reeve**

In my college gaming group, consisting of physics, computer science, and biology majors, including grad students, the trend was toward either mid-level detailed games like Call of Cthulhu and Cyberpunk or low-detailed games like Castle Frankenstein and Marvel superheroes.

### **eugene reynolds**

BESM does disallow genre-breaking skills, such as computer programming in a fantasy setting. There is no explicit rule against mecha in a fantasy campaign, but this is anime, after all.

Any player who buys inappropriate skills without consultation with the GM is asking for trouble. The point is to allow players to buy atypical skills for the sake of character skill diversity without sacrificing the genre-appropriate skills. If genre-appropriate skills were cheap, then few players would buy the expensive, tertiary, character-building skills.

### **gaylord tang**

So, is the lack of facing rules in D&D3 as jarring to anyone else as it is to me? The flanking rule does not even give the defender the option to ignore one or more attackers. Imagine a werewolf being flanked by two attackers, one with a silver weapon and one without.

### **patrick brady**

You have very valid points about modern slavery and the obsession over homosexuality we seem to have over here. I wish it were not so, but there it is.

### **david castle**

Welcome!

Given the tendency of gamers to flame each other over real-world differences of opinion and beliefs, I do not think I want to see them carry that over to their characters! : )

While I agree with your sentiment, I fear Joe Gamer would get very frustrated at a game product that did not explain everything. The game would be called “incomplete.” They might even accuse the game designer of “copping out” or trying to milk customers with future supplements that explain the fuzzy bits.

I have adopted the stance that the best way to keep my players from knowing How It All Works is to not know myself. That is why I have not bothered to figure out the true nature of the gods (or even magic since none of the PCs are mages) in my current fantasy campaign. But then, I do not make games for commercial publication.

How do you explain how something works in terms of game mechanics without making it black-and-white in the game world? Random tables do not count because the tables themselves are predictable. To avoid predictability, you have to circumvent cause-and-effect, which can be done, but is contrary to what most gamers want (or think they want) out of their rpgs.

In Misiaszek’s review of the Dying Earth RPG, he shows how the world can be kept indeterminate—no map, varying and contradictory descriptions of creatures, etc. However, he also shows the dangers once game mechanics come into play. The players will know that doing a specific activity will rejuvenate a particular dice pool. This will intrusively shape their characters’ actions in way that will probably grow very mundane and boring in a short time.

### **myles corcoran**

If the 2d6 scale of Nexus and Feng Shui is too broad for your tastes, I suggest using Fudge dice. These are particularly nice because you can select the number to roll at a time to get exactly the distribution you want.

## michael cule

RAEBNC to your explanation of the Buffyverse.

In *Buffy* and even more so in *Angel*, demons are often depicted as little more than people from a different planet rather than hell-spawn. I like the idea that there can be friendly demons, but it can spoil the atmosphere if overdone.

## spike y jones

I figured skills were supposed to answer the question whether someone was trained, not their artificial classification. As in my example, you could have a Rogue who is not trained in finding traps, yet it is not unreasonable to think a Fighter could be (think of the traps used in *Predator*).

So, in D&D3, there is no advantage in attacking a person of average Dexterity (and thus no defensive modifier) from behind? See also my comments to Gaylord Tang regarding flanking.

To follow-up on your comment to Reeve, sexual reproduction increases the likelihood of random mutations and introduces new gene combinations.

## josh kronengold

...Stupid MSWord Autocorrect...<sup>9</sup>

Any similarities between Bridget and Sophia is either purely coincidental or the subconscious product of my mishmash, fantasy gaming heritage. Aurora's predominance in the pantheon is due to Merik's and Sophia's limited scopes. I can envision in many generations Sophia and Merik will fade to a cultural footnote.

## rene a louviere jr

I cannot prove you exist at all. However, if you did exist, I could go to New Orleans, observe your movements over time and establish that you do, in fact, live there. I can then present my findings, including documentation and photographic evidence to the public for review. Independent people can come and observe you living in New Orleans. It is not a mathematical proof, but it is scientific proof.

## paul mason

Thanks for the info regarding Sophia. Since I got the name from Matt Helms, I will plead ignorance.

## brian misiaszek

Regarding Dying Earth, see my comments to Castle, above.

*In other words, "Let's Pretend" with limits and restrictions.* Every game of "let's pretend" I played as a kid had limits and restrictions. If you were playing "store," you could not pretend to turn into a bird. If you were playing "camping," you could not go inside and watch television. The setting and rules of an rpg serve much the same purpose—to place a framework around the roleplaying activities.

*Inter party fighting always makes a GM's heart sink.* I have seen **inter-party** fighting, the conflict between two parties, as the premise for many convention rpg scenarios. I have also played many games where the GM took no steps to curb **intra-party** conflict. I knew GMs who tacitly encouraged conflict by facilitating secret activities (especially by thieves) and crafting situations that would set PCs against each other.

Roleplaying games are not games in the strictly defined, Costikyan<sup>10</sup> terms. However, I think trying to redefine or reassign the term is a waste of ink. They are activities, like jumping rope, playing catch, or playing house. These non-competitive games do allow for players to fudge (mostly in the form of do-overs) and cheat (ignoring or changing implicit rules when convenient) in order to make the game more fun for all. Comparing rpgs in any way to traditional board games, computer games, or sports is misleading and ultimately meaningless.

Should we redefine the hobby to more closely resemble activities that are not roleplaying? Reshaping rpgs into something that is more palatable to the mass market would shape them into something that are no longer rpgs. I am sure it could make some game companies a bunch of money, but it will not solve the problem of bringing more people into roleplaying. Instead, it will bring them into whatever this new activity is, just like rpgs did not increase the number of wargamers in the world.

While the roleplaying in rpgs does not match the clinical use of roleplaying, it nonetheless involves playing a role much as a method actor would. In avatar games, the role is oneself, often with different abilities and surroundings. In many convention games, the roles are handed out to players. Allowing players to create their own imaginary roles and

<sup>9</sup> Sadly, MSWord does not recognize "Autocorrect," a term found under its own Tools menu.

<sup>10</sup> Based on Greg Costikyan's *I Have No Words & Must Design* article

personas does not somehow invalidate the use of the term roleplaying, which is what you seem to suggest.

Roleplaying is an escapist activity. As such, the genres of rpgs rarely follow those of everyday, modern life. When I was a kid, games with such wonderful names as “house” and “store,” were outside my day-to-day experience. Now that I have a home and have worked retail, these hold no more interest to me. So, I turn to settings like fantasy, horror, and science fiction. Modern, mundane settings hold less interest for the gaming public at large in part because they lack the same level of escapism offered by other settings.

Paradoxically, modern settings can require more work than fanciful settings because of the players’ greater familiarity of the setting. The closer a game is to the real world,” the harder it is to suspend disbelief. Also, campaigns that are focused on a specific theme like crime-drama, tend to place a tremendous burden on the GM and require knowledge and familiarity with the subject well beyond most players’ experience.

To me, the only elements really distinguishing the GM from the rest of the players are who defines what the setting is or is not, who plays the secondary characters, and who primarily steers the game session. I would say the “*play without GMs*” option is identical to the “*play where everyone is a GM*” option because all we are really doing is changing the distribution of duties between players and GM to the point where there is no distinction between the two.

The New Style games you mention are not rpgs, but storytelling games like *Once Upon a Time*.<sup>11</sup> Any time story narration takes a back seat to roleplaying, you no longer have an rpg. This is not to say the New Style games are not fun, interesting, entertaining, or worth talking about, but they are not rpgs. I cringe to call them “playing where everyone is a GM” because that implies that the role of the GM is that of narrator, which is simply not the case.

It is not the job of the GM to narrate the story or to referee, as in a football game. If the GM narrates the story, what do the other players do? Sit around and listen? Roleplaying is about the process of creating a story and not the telling of a story—even if you are telling a story on the fly. While a referee’s job is to interpret and adjudicate the rules of the game, in rpgs this task often falls to the player with the best knowledge of the rules, who may not be the GM. Referees in sports have the authority, backed by a

ruling body, to impose penalties on players for illegal conduct; GMs have no such authority except in the context of normal social interaction.

### **lisa padol**

To worship the Dark Lords is to invite evil into one’s heart. It would be impossible to do so without then committing evil. This is a Truism. More on the campaign will be forthcoming once I get past my absolute inability to write satisfying (to me) campaign write-ups.

### **brian rogers**

I liked your revamped CF system. I have been struggling with codifying the mechanics to by CF-inspired fantasy game, but nothing I created felt right. Please let us know how you handle health and damage. Also, how do you handle CF magic in this system?

Most card games use a “higher is better” paradigm, but your system is “lower is better” which may be aesthetically unappealing to some.

Aside from aesthetic factors, the only reason to vary the trump suit is to stretch the time between shuffles. Do you shuffle the cards after every draw or pair of draws? If so, then varying the trump suit based on activity is an unnecessary complication. If not, then how often do you recommend reshuffling? I was thinking of randomly placing a joker mid-way into the deck and use it to indicate when it was time to shuffle.

### **jim vassilakos**

The flippant naming and wording of the advantages and disadvantages seems to work against the tone of a hard-sf roleplaying game.

The disadvantages of obese and overweight should give you a small bonus to *floating* but a significant penalty to *swimming*. There is a reason Olympic swimmers are not obese. GURPS gets this wrong too.

I also think you place too much value on the ability of reading lips to counteract the disadvantage of deafness. Reading lips is an imprecise art prone to errors and misinterpretations, useless in most real-life situations, and far inferior to text-based translator units for clarity, especially when dealing with other species. When I worked retail, I had one hearing-impaired customer who could read lips, but getting his attention to turn and face was difficult.

Last nitpick: you mention the issue of time dilation under Dependent but not Close Dependent.

<sup>11</sup> James Wallis is also on the credits for this game.