

## conquest

Over Labor Day Weekend, I attended ConQuest for the first time. It is ran by some of the same people that used to do Pacificon. There were glitches, such as games moved without notice, and players not getting into games despite that game showing no signups.

Between roleplaying games, I made use of the board game room, something I rarely do. Evo is a fun thematic game of evolving dinosaurs. Torres is a heady, abstract game with “If I do this, I get W points, but Bob gets X points; if I do that, I get Y, points, but Bob gets Z points” kind of thought process. I enjoyed Evo more, though I can see why Torres is the more critically acclaimed game. I also played Cosmic Encounter, which remains my overall favorite boardgame.

But I am a roleplayer, and I go to cons to roleplay. I played in a V&V game of all things, which helped get me jazzed for a superhero game I will be running at DunDraCon. The D&D game was so horrid that I left after 2½ hours and after two other players had already left. The last, and best, game was essentially a superhero game set in the Wild West.

The sprits had been awakened (know one knows why). Once awakened, a spirit can enter a person’s body—a process called the spirit dance. The types of spirits included elementals (Clay, Water, etc.), totem (Eagle, Horse, etc.), ancestral (spirits of deceased Native Americans), and demon (powerful evil spirits). These spirits grant their host various special abilities and can combine to create unique abilities. I was surprised the concept held together as well as it did.

The system was Storyboard. To make a character, you essentially list the character’s attributes without numbers. Task resolution involves rolling a d10 per relevant attribute you have. For instance, you may have *shooting* and *shooting pistols* and *reliable pistol* for three dice with your Colt revolver, but only one die with your Winchester rifle. You count successes based on the difficulty set the GM. Maximum number of dice is five, you can re-roll 10s, and 1s cancel a single success. This seemed to work just fine, but the mechanics added to handle the spirit powers were much more numbers intensive.

The scenario involved a breakout from a prison make for spirit hosts. The PCs were US Marshals and their deputies who had to track down the mastermind behind the plot. Standard superhero fare but with a decidedly western feel.

## the premise

As I mentioned a before, I was inspired to run a fantasy campaign that was based more on the fantasy of faerie tales and similar works than traditional, Tolkienesque fantasy.

When I did a little research into faerie tales, I was not very happy with them. Too many were “the hero does this then the hero does this then ...” and felt more arbitrary than fanciful. My biggest draw to roleplaying is characterization and character development, and the faerie tales I read had none of that.

The campaign ended up more post-modern in the way Sigourney Weaver’s *Snow White* and Drew Barrymore’s *Ever After* are. Not a small bit of Pendragon has slipped into the campaign, as well. Most of this comes from the PCs characterizations and my inability to maintain a specific tone longer than an hour at a time.

The original intent was to have romantic<sup>1</sup> adventures. As it turns out, the PCs have been rather cautious and not prone to take the kinds of risks that would lead to high adventure. Part of this is my fault in framing the campaign around missions assigned by their duke. Concerned more about success than flair, the PCs take a more pragmatic, slow-and-steady, low-risk approach and it is often difficult for me to tempt them onto sidetracks. Because of this, I started framing the encounters and combat more realistically (or gritty) which further tarnished the tone of the campaign. However, the character subplots, including their personal growth and possible romance between them, has more than made up for the lack of chaotic character hijinks that is common in many campaigns.

## the system

I used the trait system from Castle Falkenstein and tweaked it to fit the setting. I removed the bits specific to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, combined Fisticuffs and Fencing into a generic Melee skill, created a new catch-all ability called Experience, and added the concept of specialties. I included the abilities of each PC so you can see how it came out.

I have been running it without using cards or dice, which just works better for me online. I find running diceless games is very fatiguing, so I am working on

<sup>1</sup> "marked by the imaginative or emotional appeal of what is heroic, adventurous, remote, mysterious, or idealized"

some dice-based mechanics for the system (codenamed Argos), should I ever run it offline. I will present the system when I think it is more or less presentable. I am currently stuck on how to do damage. I did run the first adventure as a BESM game for a face-to-face group, and that worked reasonably well, so I may do it again, but probably not.

Since I am lazy and have the space, I am copying the character descriptions as given to me by Matt Helms (Daphne) and Avis Crane (Bertwald). Traits are rated Poor, Average, Good, Great, Superb, or Extraordinary, though I prevented the beginning characters from taking an Extraordinary trait.

### **daphne**

Daphne is the only child of Walter Strongbow, Leopold's chief gamekeeper. Her mother died during childbirth, and Daphne was raised by her father to be independent and wise in the ways of nature. Now at the age of 19, she is a willful (some might say bull-headed) young woman more at home in the forest than indoors. She resents being thought of as "just a girl," and works very hard to prove that her position as assistant forester is well deserved. Indeed it is – she is one of the finest archers in the county, and her skill at woodcraft nearly rivals her father's. She is in many ways, though, still just a girl. She has a secret fascination with the workings of romance, and many a handsome young knight has caught her eye. She is loath to give up the feeling of freedom she gets when she is alone in the woods, however.

Daphne stands 5'8" tall, and has a slender, athletic build. She has large brown eyes that have compared to a doe's so often that it has become quite tiresome. Her brown hair reaches just past her shoulders, although it is generally worn pulled back into a ponytail. She generally dresses in a manner deemed mildly scandalous at court: a boy's shirt, with pants and a vest of leather. She generally also carries a long knife and her bow when out in the field. But anyone looking past her rough façade would see that she is a quite fetching young lady.

Athletics: Great  
Charisma: Average  
Courtly Graces: Poor (Good Repartee)  
Courage: Good  
Experience (Forestry): Good  
Horsemanship: Good  
Kindred Powers: None  
Knowledge: Average (Good Healing)  
Marksmanship: Great (Superb Bow)

Melee: Average  
Perception: Great  
Performance: Average (Good Singing)  
Physique: Good (Average Strength)  
Sorcery: Poor  
Status: Average  
Stealth: Good  
Tinkering: Average  
Wilderness: Great (Superb Wilderness Lore)

### **bertwald**

Bertwald, known as Bertie, is the 18-year-old son Hedric, Duke Leopold's jester for the past two years. This is the second time Hedric has been employed in the duke's household; the first time, Bertie had not yet been born, and his mother, the lovely Gwen, the unusually refined daughter of an ambitious local miller, was still living. She had married Hedric a year earlier, to everyone's great surprise and her father's extreme disapproval, but it shortly became clear that she was increasing. A scant 9 months later, more or less...mostly less...produced their first child, a daughter named Aelwyn.

Hedric, a short, scrawny, unprepossessing man, often bragged about his lusty marriage bed, claiming that Gwen had entrapped him into marriage because she couldn't keep her hands off him, yet his jealous accusations and the resulting fights were often overheard. The day after yet another fight, in early spring of the year that Aelwyn turned two, Hedric left the duke's employment, driving Gwen, Aelwyn, and their few possessions away in a small dogcart pulled by elderly donkey he had purchased cheaply. Bertie was born that fall.

Bertie's early memories were of traveling from gig to gig, some lasting days, others months, where his father did whatever kind of work he could get—juggling, juggling, song-and-dance, etc., and when those weren't available, scullery, gardening, stable, and other menial tasks. When Hedric couldn't find legitimate work, he sometimes resorted to thievery. Hedric survived through obsequiousness and blatant flattery to his superiors, though he detested them in private, and always had his eye on his own best chance. He generally moved on whenever suspicion began to mount against him.

Hedric began training Bertie, a small and scrawny child with the face of his mother, in juggling, dancing, singing, and other such skills, as well as in his attitudes, and added Bertie to his acts as soon as he was able. Bertie was also taught rudimentary reading and writing by his mother, before she died in childbed with her third child, the baby boy dying with

her, when Bertie was six years old. After years of acting as substitute mother (including the occasional black eye from her father, same as her mother had sported from time to time), 15-year-old Aelwyn ran off to marry the young blacksmith in the last town they had stayed in. Last Bertie had heard, she had produced a set of twin boys, and a 3rd son a year later, and now sported the occasional black eye from her husband instead of her father.

A couple years later, Hedric and Bertie's wanderings brought them back to Duke Leopold's holdings. The duke welcomed him back, installing him as the household's jester, and allowing him considerable latitude, surprising to those who remembered Hedric from the old days, and surprising to Hedric himself, though he took whatever advantage of it he could. This spell of employment has lasted an unusually long time. The duke showed an interest in Bertie, inviting him to join in the training his own sons were undergoing in horsemanship, wrestling, and arms. Hedric resisted initially, but Bertie began a long-delayed growth spurt (possibly due to eating a decent diet for the first time in his life), and along with the continually increasing height came the typical clumsiness, moodiness, pimpliness, and other side effects of adolescence—Hedric gave up on Bertie's career in the "arts" in disgust, and no longer objected to Bertie's new training.

Bertie grew well beyond his parents' heights, and eventually began to broaden, outgrowing the clumsiness. By the time he was 18, he was a 6'2" tall, heavily muscled, blond young man, still with his mother's good looks, and nothing of the look of his father except the occasional expression of slyness or obsequiousness that occasionally crossed his face, despite the mostly successful efforts of his tutors, friends, and the duke to give him a more positive outlook on life and a better set of values.

While the duke never adopted Bertie, nor corroborated the occasional, swiftly quashed rumor about Bertie's antecedents (the duke being a tall, strapping man himself), it was clear that he considered Bertie a protégé of sorts. Not lavish, still he had provided Bertie with training, some basic equipment and armor, and eventually with a decent mount. Bertie had spent most of his days with the duke's sons and the other young men of the duke's holdings, both in work and play. Lately, the duke has begun giving jobs to Bertie to do on his own. Bertie feels as though the duke is testing him out, and wants to do his best to please the duke, though he sometimes wonders if Leopold is reminding Bertie that he is not an equal of the noble sons who have been his

companions the last few years. There was no danger of Bertie ever forgetting this, however, as Hedric has been reminding him of this, sneeringly, almost daily. No matter, Bertie is grateful to the duke for all the attentions that have made his life far better recently than it had ever been, and is eager to prove himself a worthy man in the duke's eyes.

Athletics: Great

Charisma: Good

Courtly Graces: Good (Superb Dancing)

Courage: Good

Experience (Thief): Average

Horsemanship: Good

Kindred Powers: None

Knowledge: Average

Marksmanship: Good (Great Knife-throwing)

Melee: Good

Perception: Average

Performance: Good

Physique: Superb

Sorcery: Poor

Status: Average (Above Average for those who know of the duke's good favor)

Stealth: Average (Good Sleight-of-Hand)

Tinkering: Average

Wilderness: Poor (Average Navigation)

## comments

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### scott bennie

My personal objections to the death penalty have less to do with compassion than my views on justice. However, the balance of justice versus compassion is one of the key conflicts in my current campaign's religion. The campaign has taken a different turn than I intended because the PCs are firmly on the cautious side of the Valor/Cautious axis.

### patrick brady

Nice comments on Tsolyani religion and how gods are chosen based on culture and not on expected benefit. This feels more real than most other "pick the gods with the cool powers" fantasy rpgs.

## david castle

My ideal number of players is “any I can get.”

My current online fantasy game of two players would certainly suffer with more than three players. One potential problem with unbalanced groups of five is you may end up with a group of three as the two odd men out leave. Plus player dynamics determines the right number—five players who will not work together can be worse than having three cohesive players. I tend to dislike the overt inter-character conflict that you seem to think makes roleplaying fun and would prefer a smaller, less contentious group to a larger group with a lot of character conflict.

Good coaches and team managers take into consideration how well a particular player will fit with their organization. “Problem players” will often be shunned, except by those teams that are either desperate for talent or confident they can get the player to be a “team player.”

I absolutely agree about your points on our anachronistic portrayal of time and distance. In my online campaign, I typically to use “late morning” or “getting on to dusk.” I also measure travel in terms of “most of the day” or “by sunset....” My map has no scale, but I figure villages are about a days ride apart.

In real life, I stopped wearing a watch because I found myself letting the clock rule my day. I have generally found that my life is less stressful when I only have a vague, fluid notion of what time it is. Despite this, I am generally very punctual. When interfacing with time-dependent society, like catching a plane or being at a meeting, not having a watch can be more stressful, so I have taken to using a watch when I travel.

## myles corcoran

Interesting magic system, though I wonder if you have taken the analogy too literally. Where and how, physically or metaphysically, is the magic stored? Can a mage fire more than one spell at a time?

Rather than have the die roll determine what quality of magic the character finds, you could roll to determine the amount of time it takes to find the desired quality of magic. Make a Smell roll, adjusting for the quality desired and the local conditions.

Find the character’s Smell on the table below. Add the local conditions (Good = +1) and *subtract* the quality of magic (Good = -1). You can then add 4dF, though 3dF or 2dF may be more appropriate.

Superb	Quarter hour
Great	Half hour
Good	One hour
Fair	Two hours
Mediocre	Half the day
Poor	All day
Terrible	Can’t find any

Someone with Good smell can find Good magic in Good conditions in about an hour, on average. The same person looking for Superb magic in the same area would take half the day, on average. If there the character is looking for a quality of magic above the locale’s Maximum rating, then the results are always Terrible no matter how good the person’s Smell is.

## robert dushay

If the GM as established the practice of only following the dice, then showing the dice is unnecessary. The players already know the dice are “jerking them around” and the GM does not have to reinforce it. On the other hand, if the GM has a pattern of fudging rolls, showing the dice and not fudging might be interpreted as the GM jerking them around. I would rather have all rolls in the open or all rolls hidden (with the understanding they will be fudged).

Regarding neutral reviews, there is a reason why *Consumer Reports* accepts no advertising or free samples for evaluation. I would never suggest that receiving free review copies influences reviewers like Spike. Other reviewers may be improperly influenced and it adds a temptation for the publisher to place “no negative reviews” stipulations on comp copies.

The web is a wonderful source for neutral reviews. It is also a wonderful source of terribly biased reviews. Unfortunately, telling the two apart is tricky. *A&E* is about as neutral as you can get, apart from the expected personal biases of each individual contributor.

## paul mason

I share your sentiments about the split in the rpg community between reactionary “old school” and radical “nouveaux school.” Both sides are much too preachy and condescending for their own good. As a player, I have never had the desire to return to the dungeon. I have as a GM, but only because it is so

simple to run. However, I abandon the idea once I remember that I would be bored after the first two hours.

I prefer the term *roleplaying* to *role gaming* because I am playing a character, not gaming a character. While I agree with you that the term “game” is not problematic, I disagree with you that “role-playing” is a misnomer. If you want a term that really captures what we do, use the ones from our childhood, “make believe” or “let’s pretend.”

“Play where everyone is GM” is roleplaying if the participants actually roleplay characters. It is not roleplaying if they just narrate stories or create non-fictional accounts (biography, history, ecology, geography, sociology, etc.) of the fictional game world and the people who live there.

### **brian misiaszek**

Clearly, the easiest way to speed up game play is to have everything prepared as thoroughly as possible beforehand. That under-two-hour movie you want to emulate took *months* of preparation with many people working on different aspects (scenery, special effects, costuming, scripts, etc.).

Having an official caller or spokesperson for the group only slows things down as people dictate to the caller what their characters are doing and then the caller tells the GM. The only way this speeds things up is if players are willing to let the caller make decisions for their characters, which is not going to happen with any group I have ever been in.

While having a heated pace gives more time for *more* character interactions, are they *better* interactions? Please remember that players are not following a script and have not had dozens of rehearsals and retakes to get the dialogue right. Real-life, real-time interactions often have a much slower pace than action movie dialogue. Furthermore, your typical movie does not have a half-dozen protagonists who all want to express themselves in the same scene.

Would Hackmaster’s Honor trait penalize a thief or assassin who acted dishonorably? If a thief gains Honor by letting an enemy attack first, what happens when they backstab somebody—does their Honor go down?

### **jonathan nichols**

In Fudge,<sup>2</sup> a Superb golfer cannot technically make a Terrible shot unless you fudge the rules. The worst possible result is Mediocre (1/81 chance),

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<sup>2</sup> Sorry, my comments to Myles got me thinking about Fudge.

which may not be good enough to reach the green, but will not put the ball too far into the woods.

According to *The Memoirs of Auberón of Faerie*, Auberón wanted to prevent all the wars that had taken place around the Rhine in Earth’s history,<sup>3</sup> so he turned the Rhine into a sea to act as a natural barrier to aggression. I did not claim it was a good rationale.

An ex-coworker of mine is an avid competitive bridge player and her descriptions of some of the twenty-something social misfits she has encountered were eerily close to many of those in our niche hobby. Bad hygiene, no ability to carry a conversation, no job, lives in their parents’ basement, all they do is play bridge and go to tournaments, etc.

### **robert rees**

I much prefer first-person perspective, but I can live with third-person. What really gets under my skin is, “My character talks to his character” as a replacement for “Sebastian says, ‘Albert, we need to talk.’” Whether first- or third-person, the character’s voice must be heard. My rule is, “Don’t say what your character says; say it as your character.” The natural LARP extension is “Don’t say what your character does; do it as your character.”

I do not mind players helping each other with out-of-character suggestions, when appropriate, such as playing with neophyte roleplayers or players who are over their heads (playing a character with better intellectual or social skills than the player possesses). Ideally, it should be used to elevate the roleplaying of the group as a whole, but of course, out-of-character hinting should be curtailed if it becomes disruptive.

### **eugene reynolds**

You are a cruel, cruel man. Poor Chip. I was going to tell you the nickname I was subjected to in high school, but I fear you will start using it!

### **jonathan tweet**

While I am sure *Tékumel* could be done just fine under d20 rules, I think the saturation of fantasy settings under the d20 banner would not have done *Tékumel* any service. Besides, why would another game company want to buy the rights to *Tékumel* only to be handcuffed by the d20 license restrictions? Chaosium already had the rights to *Melniboné*, so it was not a big deal to do a d20 version. If you wanted a d20 *Tékumel*, you should have gotten *WotC* to step up to the plate, or you could try to convince *GOO* to make a d20 conversion.

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<sup>3</sup> He retrieved a history book from a future alternate earth.