

DunDraCon is coming up¹ and I am busy preparing. I missed the deadline for January, so here is a double-dose of comments along with more musing on the role of rules and a review.

<something happens>

the role of rules

In my comments to Paul Mason last time, I made reference to the traditional narrative structure of roleplaying: “I swing at the beast...” <something happens> “... breaking its jaw.” In this example, the player decides what the character does and the GM describes the result. What happens in the middle depends on the rules.

I contend that the role of rules is to make decisions or aid in the making of decisions by the GMs and players alike. This role defines the division of power in the game.

When taking about rule transparency, people typically mean two different things:

- 1) When changing or applying a rule, the results should be obvious.
- 2) The rules need to disappear and do their function without disrupting the flow of the game.

The first definition of transparency puts a cap on the complexity of the rules and also precludes entire classes of clever and fun rules. A lack of transparency is often a complaint against dice pool systems. When playing a WW game, what effect does changing the difficulty up or down have on the actual odds of success or failure? On a simple linear system, like d20 or BRP, the effects of each modifier are clear. While important, I leave this topic for a future discussion.

The second definition of transparency has been mentioned often in these pages and is most relevant to the topic at hand. Paul said the rules should be a “crystal clear glass, performing its functions efficiently and unobtrusively.” Interestingly, this is exactly the opposite of Robert Dushay’s desire to have rules that are fun to play. You cannot have rules that are both transparent and fun. At least if the rules are fun, you do not mind their lack of transparency. The fun vs. transparent question is closely related to a

gamist vs. narrativist debate that I do not want to even touch at this point.

Using rules can be disruptive to the flow of the game. If you have to look something up, you are breaking the flow and decreasing immersion into the characters and setting. Transparent rules are more conducive to flow and immersion but having rules so transparent they are insubstantial can be equally disruptive. The rules need to have enough structure and tools to prevent the GM wasting time pondering a modifier or players debating how to apply value rules. To avoid disruption of flow, you must either know the rules so well that you do not have to look them up or you let go of the desire for accuracy and make decisions quickly.

Stephen O’Sullivan took the second approach with Fudge. Acknowledging that the game designer does not know everything,² he instead created Fudge as a framework onto which people could easily determine their own rules and modifiers and make their own decisions. There is wisdom in this approach, but gets Fudge unfairly tagged with the label “incomplete.” SOS specifically wanted to avoid the disruption of looking of rules and created a game with a limited range of descriptors and very easy mechanics. In doing so, however, more responsibility is placed on the GM to make the right decisions.

Detailed rules can resolve unicorn and reverse-unicorn problems and make the task of running a game much easier. The game designer provides all the appropriate mechanics and modifiers appropriate to a situation. When the GM and players lack the appropriate knowledge base, they can rely upon the rules to show them the way. Unfortunately, a related type of unicorn problem occurs when the players and/or GM know more about the topic than the game designer. Also, keeping detailed rules transparent requires a lot of memorization and slight of hand.

If you rely on a game rule like a table, a die roll, or a set mechanism for resolving a conflict, you no longer have the burden of responsibility to make decisions on your own. I read once that the appeal of submissive behavior, especially when applied to the extremes of voluntary slavery, is the complete lack of responsibility. By giving all power to another party, submissives no longer have to think for themselves. Some GMs allow themselves to be submissive to the rules of the game. They are unwilling or unable to make decisions on their own without reference to the rules. I have very little respect for GMs who slavishly

¹ And will be over by the time you read this.

² <http://www.io.com/~sos/rpg/fudcomplete.html>

follow what the dice or books say because they lack the imagination or willpower to do otherwise.

However, if the GM creates the campaign with the premise of the “dice do not lie,” then I find it more palatable. Giving rules full authority in decision-making without GM interference or veto sets a tone that some people may want. Of course, the GM should clearly communicate what role the rules will play and gain player acceptance of this approach.

I am sounding far too negative, using terms like submissive, when I do not mean to be. There is substantial benefit to be gained by using rules to make decisions. The freedom from some responsibility allows the GM to focus on other aspects of the game, such as roleplaying NPCs, moving behind-the-scene plots, or developing the world. The question for any gaming group is how to divide the responsibility among the GM, players, and the rules.

GMing is a big job and with any large project, it is wise to delegate power to others, provided those people are competent and up to the challenge of making good decisions. Unfortunately, most game rules do not make good decisions. Sometimes, they make wild, unexpected decisions that lead a game in a new and interesting direction that the GM and players would never had gone on their own. But other times, the decisions are arbitrary and dull.

To follow this analogy further, the GM and players are members of a team set out to create a fun and memorable campaign. The rules are also part of that team, but lack the imagination and flexibility of the human members. As such, they can serve as a healthy force of stability and neutral arbitrator when the GM and players disagree or have different visions. But the rules can do harm to the campaign, and it is the responsibility of the GM and players to veto the decisions of the rules when it benefits the campaign.

Lisa Padol mentioned in a comment to Paul that the GM helps provide a unity of vision. The GM can be thought of as the project or team leader. The rules are more like technical experts who need not be called into every decision but who can be used as a reference when required. Of course, the rules tend to be single-minded and may make decisions that are aesthetically unappealing.

Some players use the rules as a check against bad GM decision-making. The worst are those who choose to use or ignore rules based on how favorably it works for the character.

Many players look with distain upon rules that affect a character’s personality and actions. These kinds of rules are an attempt by the game designer to help the players make decisions that are appropriate

to the setting and the characters’ roles, but these rules can come across as too draconian and taking away the players’ power of their own characters.

The burden on the rules designer is to create a good template for decision-making for GMs and players alike. How detailed and specific this template is depends is a matter of preference. Ideally, as pointed out by Robert Dushay, the rules would also be fun to play in-and-of-themselves. Cool rules that lead to bad decisions will destroy a game unless you put in lots of other things to distract the GM and players.

Hopefully next time I will leave this rhetorical rambling and start getting into actual game mechanics (dice, descriptors, and whatnot).

review

little fears

Little Fears seemed like it was tailor suited to me. I tend to gravitate towards horror campaigns and have often used children as a catalyst in games (and I think I roleplay them fairly well). I put off buying it mainly because I have been trying to cut down on my rpg purchases. I finally picked it up for \$16 during a 20% - off sale.

The concept is childhood horror: the monster in the closet, the bully down the street, and the stranger in the car. Though the characters are all children, Little Fears is a very adult game touching on disturbing themes and obviously not for everyone. There are no “what is a roleplaying game” section and the author assumes a mature audience and experienced roleplayers.

Little Fears is 138 10”x8” pages, including plenty of filler. There is a lot of artwork, some very effective while others barely passable. In some places, such as the character sheet made to look like crinkled notebook paper, the style overwhelms the substance, and I would have preferred a cleaner look. Most of the pages have light gray background with shading of darker gray, but the font is large, keeping the text generally easy to read. The production also suffered from occasional odd paragraph spacing and editing oversights.

The simplistic system uses a single (sometimes two) six-sided die. In a nice touch, monsters typically have no stats. Rather than roll for a monster to grab a kid, roll to see if the kid escapes—failure means capture. This keeps the monsters mysterious and scary and keeps the focus on the characters.

Character creation is done very nicely and simply, with five stats and no skills, plus positive and negative Qualities (which add bonus or penalty dice, ala OTE) such as “Favorite Child” and “Class Clown.” Characters also have Soul, Fear, and Innocence ratings. Innocence is lost through trauma and birthdays, scaled such that all children lose their innocence, and the ability to sense the monsters with it, on their thirteenth birthdays.

Adults, who are at best blind to the monsters and at worst being manipulated by them, exacerbate the helplessness of the children. Children can fight back with the power of belief magic (the belief that a particular toy or ritual will keep the monsters at bay), but I get a sense that, as in *Call of Cthulhu*, the fight against the monsters is ultimately a hopeless battle. This is a horror game in the truest sense of the word.

Closetland is a hell dimension created from and feeding upon fear—it is the domain of the bogeyman. The seven Kings (each linked to one of the vices), ruled by the Demagogue, send out their minions to our world to terrorize, kidnap, and corrupt children. The connection to the vices feels forced and does not add to the flavor of the game as one would hope.

The various monsters and meanies are only given a few paragraphs each, leaving the GM to fill in the descriptive details (after all, each monster is unique in its own horrific way). *Little Fears* includes three scenarios that are more like advanced adventure seeds. Something about the art of the Kings, the character-focused mechanics, and general oddness reminded me of *Whispering Vault*.

In the end, unfortunately, the concepts failed to grasp me. With rpgs I really like, I usually start getting ideas for campaigns and characters before I am even half way through reading it. With *Little Fears*, I was surprised how uninspired I was. Even the sample adventures were lacking that essential spark.

Creating a horror game based around kids is not that hard—I am sure anyone can do it using a version of their favorite game mechanics. *Little Fears* does have some nice touches and thought put into character creation, such as the selection of Qualities, but other aspects of the system, like the artificiality of age 13, do not work so well for me. The concept of *Closetland* and the Kings, I can take or leave.

I do commend Key 20 Publishing and the author, Jason L Blair, on this work. It is good to see small, independent companies put out unique games and not churn out derivative d20 work. The \$20 price tag is costly for what you get, but acceptable for a new publisher. I just wish I could actually recommend it.

robert dave castle

So sorry about that.³ That is what happens when you are alphabetically next to Robert Dushay.⁴

I think what you need is a LotR television series, where the detail can be spread out over many smaller episodes, but then the budget would be crap.

paul dayraven

As a player, I try to force the GM to skip over tedious, mundane ~~crap~~ minutia. As a GM, I force my players to skip over it. Fortunately, the people I play with share my views on this matter.

michael hopcroft

From what I have seen of the Action! preview, it is just another reworking of the Hero/Fuzion system, akin to Fuzion and Brandon Blackmoor’s *Jazz*

richard iorio ii

Around my college rpg group, the term “Ravenloft” is a verb meaning “to completely screw up a module or plot, especially by skipping right to the end” or by destroying the context of the flavor text by doing things the designer never intended.

I find BESM 2nd edition’s layout to be frustrating, especially when I am looking for something specific. Color-coding the margins would have been more helpful than using the same green/yellow motif for every section. It is pretty, but not all of the art works for me.

joshua kronengold

Rings of wood, iron, and meat, but not onion? :)

OTE’s treatment of narrow/powerful traits seemed wonky to me at first because of the change in scale. If you used a traditional point-based system with narrow traits costing less per die and powerful traits costing more, it would seem more palatable. But we are given this “one central and two side traits, one of the three being superior” structure that give you more dice for narrow traits, even if you did not want them. As an aside, I almost always set the central trait as the character’s superior trait.

³ My terrible track record with names is one of the reasons I do not mind the Brady/Riley mix-ups.

⁴ Ya! Blame him. :)

spike y jones

In college, a friend and I ran a GM-less dungeon crawl using the random dungeon creator. It helped alleviate the severe boredom we were suffering, but I would not want a regular diet of it. If I remember correctly, my psionic illusionist was mind-controlled by a demon and died while attacking the other PC.

rene a louviere jr

In Rutaeor's description, you should explain why he has two symbols (old versus new).

paul mason

I really liked the Thibaudeau font. It works better as a title font, but the copy was not as hard to read as I first feared.

brian christopher misiaszek

It took you about three minutes to read a three or four pages of combat in a book, but how long did it take the author to write? The process of creation takes far longer than simply reading the combat description does. When reading, you can easily sit back and passively enjoy the ride; all the tension and excitement is spoon-fed to you. I **do not** want this kind of experience in my roleplaying. I think you are focusing too much on the end product and not the process that creates it.

There are games like Amber and OTE that have methods of condensing a combat down into a few minutes. You can also vary the level of detail depending on your desires, the importance of the fight, and the relative ability levels of the combatants.

simon reeve

Farscape is a good example of a group of characters without a leader, especially in the earlier episodes before they started listening to John's plans. Eventually, most groups will develop a leadership structure just because nature abhors a vacuum.

What is a failure but a success that has not happened yet? The key is setting the time scale for time-dependent tasks (fixing a car, picking a lock, researching some fact, making gunpowder, getting a date, etc.). If the skill roll indicates a time-for-success that is longer than the character has, then the character failed.

On the table that determined time-for-success, you can place "infinity" to indicate the character will never be successful. It is just a question of whether the character can theoretically succeed given enough

time or if the task is truly beyond the character's skill. No skill system handles this to my satisfaction.

For tasks with no specific time limit, the GM can break it down into smaller time scales and give the characters a chance to give up, "after a day of working, the vehicle still will not start, keep trying?" For tasks that are not time dependent and require a simple "did you succeed right now?" answer, just use the skill roll normally.

Even with advanced warning and long-range sensors, defending deep space is still an r-squared problem. You need the enemy to approach close enough so that your defenses can cover the battle area and not have the enemy slip around you. The trick is finding the sweet spot between being close enough to fight effectively and far enough to avoid any collateral damage to the world you are defending.

brian rogers

If an NPC tells a PC that her memories are fabricated, and the player reacts poorly, you can always just have the NPC be lying. What you did *was* high-handed GM tampering, but if the player *liked* it, then you should be commended. Think of it as a GM's gambit, if you will.

Your everyday, non-DC comics fan assumes that Superman has super strength, super breath, and super toughness (or invulnerability). Not Tactile TK, TK shove, and a TK-field. Superman is an ESPer like Jean Grey? This concept is completely foreign to how we tend to think of Supes. When I recently read Superboy use the term "tactile TK" it felt awkward. Be that as bad as it may be, the real issue is how would you fit in super strength, super breath, and invulnerability that were *not* linked to TK?

In my opinion, too many people are using d20 as a hammer looking for genres to nail rather than finding the proper tool for the job.

jim vassilakos

None of your proposed plots really calls out for FTL setting. In fact, they all can be done in the same system, planet, or even city. STL does not limit the types of campaigns, only their geographic and time scale. You can explore these scales more in an STL game than an FTL game.

paul cardwell

BRP is Basic Role-Playing, the core game mechanic Chaosium used for Call of Cthulhu, Runequest, Worlds of Wonder, Stormbringer, Superworld, Ringworld, etc. Pendragon uses a heavily tweaked, d20 variant of BRP.

myles corcoran

You are exactly right. Dice take power away from GM and players alike. They act as a neutral third-party, if you will. And yes, this is exactly what many GM and players want.

paul mason

I do think we are parallel tracks. Continue following your assertion-based track and I will follow my decision-making track and we will find out where we end up. I like your focus on the “actual gamed experience” rather than reinventing the experience.

brian christopher misiaszek

You say “something needs to be done to speed up play,” but I do not think all games need to be sped up. I mostly play with small groups who do not play D&D or Champions so combat is never too long. I liked Brian Roger’s suggestions last issue. I would also add you need to use enough visualization tools to avoid confusion but not so much that people start calculating range and line of sight.

In the Delta Green campaign, it may take a few minutes of game time for my turn to come around, but as I am enjoying watching the others, the time flies. To approach anything like movie-style combat, all the players would be doing their thing simultaneously and we would miss out on the fun of being the audience.

lisa padol

Nightlife having werewolves feeding off pain is most certainly a game balance mechanism—some twisted symmetry to give all kin the ability, if not the requirement, to feed. But when it comes down to it, I would expect werewolves to feed on ... meat.

Jules and Vincent discussing Le Big Mac should only be done in moderation if they are not the only two PCs. If they are two PCs of a group, they can have their discussion while the GM deals with other PCs. Good players roleplay even with the limelight is elsewhere. My grail as a GM is to get the players to a point where they say, “Go away, we’re roleplaying.”

simon reeve

Once a planet like Arrakis has created an oxygen atmosphere, it could maintain the atmosphere for a very long time, I would imagine, until humans arrived.

Since rape is more about power and dominance than sex, is there really a correlation between sexual openness and low occurrences of rape?

Any fletcher would recognize the importance of tail fins on a rocket. A tail stick could easily have been discovered accidentally.

eugene reynolds

Game-essential skills are expected to be over-used. These skills are simply worth more because of their importance.

By charging more for them, you help keep their levels under control. If they are cheap, the players will tend to max-out these skills. If I understand you correctly, you see this as a benefit and not a problem. To a certain extent, I see this point—if the party is a group of highly-skill mercenaries, they should have the skills to reflect this and if you charge too much for these skills, they will not have enough points to buy non-essential skills. For these types of games, I think it would be best to give the characters free levels in game-essential skills and allow them to increase (or decrease) them at a higher cost.

For skills that are not essential, it is acceptable to allow characters higher levels and not unbalance the game. If you charge more points for them, you make the player feel penalized for attempting to break out of stereotypes.

christina stiles

Welcome. The kanershee are a neat idea, but the link to blink dogs seems superfluous. I would think any dog could be trained to smell-out lycanthropes in human and beast forms; they may even do this naturally. The howl is a nice effect.

Ignoring genetics, how does someone breed blink dogs? It would be hard to keep them in captivity. With an intelligence of 10, they have human-level cognition and nigh impossible to domesticate. Even if befriended, why would they breed with domesticated dogs? This seems like deviant sexual behavior for a creature with a wisdom as high as 13.