

Ignorable Theme

What sort of task gets assigned to a PC to do?

First I ask, "who is most qualified for this task?" Assuming all is equal, I think the dividing line between depends on what the game is about. Obviously, the game should always be about the exploits of the PCs and not the NPCs, but only those activities that are interesting and compatible with the capabilities of the PCs and interests of the players. If the PCs decide to have NPCs perform a task, maybe it is because the players do not want the game to be about the types of tasks that GM is giving them.

What the game is about can change over the course of a campaign. Early in a knight's career, it is his job to ride into battle and risk death on a regular basis. As the knight becomes a lord and ages, it becomes his job to send others into battle and risk death. The game shifts from being about battles to being about the politics and intrigue before and after the battle.

What the game is about may differ between characters. If a monster must be fought and defeated, there may be PCs who sit out the fight simply because they have different roles to play. To illustrate this point, look at a typical episode of Buffy.

Problems arise when the players forget what the game is about—when they think the game is about keeping their characters safe and alive instead of taking the risks that the story within the game requires. A horror game is ruined when all the PCs decide to play it safe and leave instead of uncovering the mystery. On the other hand, the GM must give the PCs tasks that are appropriate and interesting.

For those who like to think in more cinematic terms, the PCs' job is anything that happens on-screen. If it happens off-screen, then the NPCs can do it. There are exceptions of course, but this is not a bad guideline.

Suppose the PCs slough off a task to the NPCs and the GM feels that it is something the PCs should be doing; what should be done about it? I would begin by simply asking why they delegated to the NPCs. I would then offer reasons why they should not have the NPCs do it, but in a way that makes sense from the PCs' point of view and not in a meta-gaming, "because you're the PCs" way. If they persist with their "let the NPCs do it" plan, I would either resolve the task normally (this might be a long and boring process), simply skip over the scene, or maybe hand the players the NPC character sheets and have them play it out.

Cool Stuff

On Bruce Baugh

On rpg.net, Bruce Baugh said, "...most play is neither deep nor complex, and that therefore we want to arrange things so that it's easy to do fun and cool stuff with your character." Personally, I think this is spot-on and addresses the popularity of D&D (and d20 in general), the longevity of Rifts (and Palladium in general), the real reason people play Vampire (and WW games in general), and why lite or narrative-based systems will never capture the heart and minds of the average gamer.

Combat Mechanics

On Ranged versus Melee Combat

Most discussion of combat mechanics and methods tends to focus on hand-to-hand fights. In some ways, ranged weapons are easier for a skill system to handle, but their use has to mesh with the rules developed for melee combat.

Ranged combat is a simple action but melee is a complex action that involves many smaller steps (unless you use a one swing = one roll model). Whereas melee combat is about creating and exploiting an opening, ranged combat is about waiting for an opening and firing. While you can say that one roll in melee represents a series of maneuvers, ranged combat rolls typically represent one shot or at least one burst. This is particularly troublesome when modern guns are involved and the game designer has not made sure that they use the same time scale. Typically, guns are given a rate of fire such that multiple shots can be taken per melee round.

Defending against a melee attack involves footwork, dodging, parries, and counter-attacks. To avoid getting shot at range, you typically make yourself a moving target and/or a smaller target, often by interposing something between you and the shooter. Unlike an hand-to-hand attack, standing there hoping the other guy misses is a valid defense against ranged attacks, particularly with crude weapons or unskilled attackers.

You can also counter-attack against ranged attacks. Shooting back is a good way to put the shooter on the defensive. If you are within melee range, you can counter-attack much as you would a hand-to-hand attack. d20's attacks of opportunity against ranged attacks kind of address this, but their use of AC mucks it up.

Combat in melee range is clearly a skill vs. skill affair—the winner gains an advantage over the loser. Attacking at range is more skill vs. difficulty, with the difficulty increasing when the target does a good job of dodging. But perhaps this is too subtle of a distinction to make.

System Proposal

I will use 3 combat abilities: Melee, Marksmanship, and Athletics. Of course, you can break Melee and Marksmanship down into different skills based on weapon (or no weapon). Melee does not simply mean how to strike and parry with a weapon, but also includes knowing how to position one's body to make openings and avoiding blows. Athletics represents overt, acrobatic maneuvers like diving, jumping, and running; in combat, it is used as a defense.

In a combat round, pick one ability to use. Using more than one ability incurs penalties to the skill roll (or may not be allowed at all, depending on the circumstances and weapons used). I will use "simultaneous actions" so that there is no attack or defense roll—just a single skill roll by each side. I will assume that the system of opposed skill rolls rates the outcome on a scale of minor, moderate, or major success.

Melee vs. Melee: The winner creates an opening; the size of the opening is the success rating; how that opening is exploited is left to the player. If the player simply chooses to injure the opposition, the severity of the wound is based on the success rating (minor, moderate, or major). The player can also choose some tactical advantage, but some maneuvers (like tripping or disarming an opponent) require a greater opening than others.

Does there need to be mechanism by which both opponents can hurt each other simultaneously? You could shift points between the offensive and defense so that it is possible for both sides to create an opening.

Melee vs. Marksmanship (close range only): If the melee roll wins, treat as above. If the marksmanship wins, the target is hit before any melee opening is created. At this close range, there is no minimum roll required to hit with a missile weapon—you just have to beat the opposing melee roll.

Again, a rule to allow both attacks to land may be desired. If you swing at someone who shoots you, your swing could still potentially land, probably at a penalty.

Marksmanship vs. Marksmanship: This scenario basically has two people shooting each other. It is possible that they could hit each other. All they have to do is roll good enough to score a hit based on range, size, lighting, etc.

Marksmanship vs. Athletics: One person is shooting while the other one is trying not to be shot. If the marksmanship roll, modified for range, size, etc., is higher than the athletics roll, it is a hit; otherwise, not. The system should be structured such that Marksmanship vs. Athletics is always a more difficult shot than Marksmanship vs. Just Standing There. It is possible to "shoot on the run" and use athletics and marksmanship at the same time, but your marksmanship roll is penalized.

Melee vs. Athletics: Treat as melee vs. melee except that the person using athletics is basically in full dodge mode. Gaining an opening using Athletics would allow you to withdraw from the melee if you wish. Using both athletics and melee at the same is not as useful because it penalizes your melee roll.

Multiple Actions/Attackers

A character can use multiple abilities during a fight, but incurs penalties for using two or more abilities. If you want to take on two people, you can use Melee twice, but at a penalty against both. Athletics can be used against multiple foes and it only counts as one "use." Against five thugs, you can engage one with Melee and use Athletics against the other four; this only counts as two actions. Trying to take on all five in melee would count as five actions, which may still be a viable option if you have a high enough ability.

Damage

The damage delivered by an attack is based on the success rating, the weapon, the attacker's strength, and the defender's armor. Achieving the proper balance of all these factors is, I fear, beyond my ability.

I do not know if I want a gritty, any wound can kill, system or a more cinematic approach where only important wounds can kill. Combat should be dramatic and wounds should add to the drama. I like the threat of death, but I do not like killing PCs. I like the thought that any weapon, held by a skilled user, can kill. I also like the thought that any weapon, no matter how large or how strong the wielder, might still only graze. I want a system that is quick and has minimal bookkeeping, but not a minimalist system.

Maybe I will figure something out or find a game that fits, but I doubt it.

Myles Corcoran: There are very many rpgs that feature sex quite prominently. Most are freeform online and pbem games. Nevertheless, most gamers cannot even roleplay romantic relationships (as I lamented last issue) so why worry about sexual ones?

Robert Dushay: Service-based taxes do make some sense. For example, gasoline taxes, license fees, and bridge tolls mean that those who use the service pay for it. Of course, budgets are rarely structured so that services are self-reliant and some vital social services, such as education, cannot or should not generate revenue.

I have no issue with being required to carry auto insurance in case my dangerous behavior does someone harm. Having insurance against uninsured drivers is an unfortunate side effect of human behavior but I would rather have the insurance than not. It would be a non-issue (almost) if (at least minimum coverage) auto insurance was provided through the DMV and part of your (greatly increased) driver's license fee.

The rise of regressive taxation is because the people most affected by it do not have a voice in government.

Joshua Kronengold: Since most or all of your combat rolls involve perception, can we just say that perception is integrated as part of the combat skill itself?

Paul Mason: My bad experiences have mostly been with power-mongering, scene-stealing, GM-hogging players who do not know how to share. I have no patience with GMs who let the loudest, fastest talking, player control the game. When I play, I do not want to be in a shouting match with the other players, I do not want to be ignored, and I certainly do not want to be penalized because I was polite enough to allow someone else to speak first.

Combat is very chaotic. The GM has to bring order and structure to insure that everyone is involved. Traditional initiative systems are a natural way to do this—every player acts in order of their character's ability. Just going around the table asking each player what they are doing works well too. The problem with adding any type of temporal order is that it conflicts with how combat actually works. But personally, I would much rather have order than authenticity.

Victor Raymond: Poisons illustrate rpg's inability to model injuries in a way that accounts for something other than a blunt force trauma. Heck, most systems cannot realistically deal with a broken rib so they do not have any hope of modeling poisoning in all its varieties.

Simon Reeve: Only about 01% of stellar systems are likely to allow "life as we know it?" That seems awfully high.

Eugene Reynolds: To give my personal answer to your question to Joshua Kronengold regarding male versus female characters, I think the lack of symmetry demonstrates a problem where women are defined by their gender but men are not (probably because "male" has become a default). Some people, men and women both, define themselves by their gender first, but I doubt most do and certainly this should not be the case for everyone.

Brian Rogers: The problems you describe with villain speeches stems not only from a lack of player control, as you mentioned, but a revisionist view of genre conventions. Roleplaying provides the opportunity for players to buck genre conventions—the old adage, "I wouldn't do that!" They can choose not to go down the dark, rickety stairway alone and they can shoot the villain during the soliloquy.

Bob Newhart playing a baseball manager could be really funny, but probably not as a series.

For an ongoing campaign that only meets rarely, I suggest running self-contained scenarios that have a definite end, much like a convention game with recurring players and characters. I see several benefits to this approach:

- ◆ No plot lines are left hanging.
- ◆ No issues of player memory or losing threads from the last session.
- ◆ No worries if individual players cannot make it.
- ◆ Provides immediate satisfaction and resolution that a multi-session scenario cannot.
- ◆ You can use the time between sessions to develop plot points off-camera, move forward events in the game world, and add character development.
- ◆ Working around missing players is easy.
- ◆ If needed, the campaign can be ended silently and gracefully without the feeling of quitting in the middle.

Marco Sublas

Welcome. I wish I had something more witty to say.