

## Xenozine #96

I wrote write-ups for both GenCon and ConQuest but found them sorely lacking after reading the superior write-ups of issue #337, so I gutted them and highlighted a few points.

## GenCon

I experienced none of the much-maligned problems of GenCon Indy. Why? Because I pre-registered early, did not run a game, and came prepared. I spent most of my time roleplaying and trying a number of games that were new to me (including several by Eden Studios). For those A&Eers I saw, glad I saw ya. For those I missed, sorry I missed ya. : )

I finally got a chance to play Ironclaw once (and twice). I have a review/synopsis of the game on my website so I will not bore you with the details. While it is a fairly crunchy system, it holds together very well and captures my imagination much more than D&D does. I had always wanted to pick up Jadeclaw but had resisted because I had never played the system, but I broke down and made it my sole "guilty pleasure" purchase at GenCon.

Unfortunately, I was so enamored by Ironclaw, that when I played in Savage Worlds, I kept rolling the wrong dice. I will leave the write-ups for that game to Peter Hildreth or the Docs Misiaszek or Stevens. Savage Worlds seemed to work fairly well, and I am definitely interested in playing it again, but I have so far resisted rushing out and buying it for lack of a regular campaign.

## ConQuest

ConQuest went well for me as I was able to get into several games. One disappointment was a Starship Zero game for which I was the only player to sign-up. Since I knew the GM from a previous group, we had breakfast together instead. Another friend had a terrible time getting into games and it would have been a near wash-out if he had not been able to crash a Buffy game, in which I also played, and my CoC game.

I ran CoC on Monday morning, which I found is the perfect, least stressful time for me to run a game providing I do not have to give friends rides to the airport. Set in a small seaside village on the Oregon coast in 1953, *Safe Harbor* was supposed to be a "run away from the zombies" scenario. I even contemplated using All Flesh Must Be Eaten for it, but after playing AFMBE at GenCon, I decided against it. I did not like the game enough to buy it just for this one scenario and instead used my old standby, CoC, with a caveat in

the description that it was a non-mythos game inspired by classic horror films (namely, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but I did not tell them that).

The plot involves mind-controlling/brain-eating jellyfish that infiltrate the town and spread among the townsfolk and eventually the PCs. Since it takes POW hours from those infected to become controlled, most of infected PCs were doomed, knew they were doomed, and faced with the horror of losing their minds. By the final scene, only 2 of the 7 PCs were uninfected and they were pointing guns at each other (only 3 of the PCs had access to a gun, and they were 2 of them). Typical rpg chaos. : ) One of the two left town with a (secretly) infected PC, so he was ultimately doomed and it made for a nice closing shot with the two of them driving off.

Everyone had fun, though I failed to hit all the classic creepy horror tones that I wanted. However, it did have an appropriately cinematic ending, so I was pleased. I had had this seed of an idea stuck in my brain for months and I am glad to finally get it out so I can move on to other things.

## Angel

I am gearing up for an Angel campaign that will hopefully start in October. You can see some of the details at [www.xenongames.com/angel.htm](http://www.xenongames.com/angel.htm). The initial release date for the Angel RPG from Eden Studios was July, but that has slipped while the manuscript languishes in approvals over at FOX. If it does not come out in time, we will probably just start with the Buffy rules. In preparation, I am watching the DVDs of Angel season 1, and reading hard-boiled mysteries (I plan to take the plots and "Whedon-ize" them).

## More Cool Stuff

### Jared A. Sorensen On RPGnet

"The best thing about AU [Arcana Unearthed -PR] (aside from the wicked high content:fluff ratio) is that the book is written as if Monte sat down and asked himself, 'What would be really *cool*?'" [Emphasis his].

Along with the Bruce Baugh quote from my previous zine, I wonder how much of gaming is just (geeky?) people trying to be cool. Don't get me wrong, I like doing cool stuff in a game and playing cool characters who can do cool things, but what most people find cool, I don't.

Do gamers *need* structured, fiddly rules to do cool things? Of course not. Do they *want* them? Apparently so. While I appreciate the need to have some structure and framework—most people do not want to deal with the issues of less structured games—the excessive "built in cool" factor of mainstream games really turns me off.

Enough people commented on my initial comment<sup>1</sup> that I thought I had better respond in more detail. I do not own UA and I have only played a few times, so my comments may be off base.

Except for the dice tricks (flip-flops, et al), UA does not seem to benefit from having a percentile-based system. Any system (d20, dice pool, etc.) could work. There was a particularly good Fudge conversion at <http://www.edromia.com>, but it was missing when I just checked.

Most diceless systems are based on the concept that you succeed automatically if your ability is greater than the difficulty factor or opposing ability. Similarly, UA does not require die rolls in non-stressful situations provided the character's skill is high enough. The question then is what to do about stressful situations?

What I originally imagined was a system like that found in Nobilis, the Marvel Universe game, or System DL. The latter system, it is a simple "if your stat + skill is higher than the difficulty, you succeed." Players spend points from a Luck attribute to increase their total. Luck is replenished by taking penalties on actions.

So, the first step is inverted UA from a "roll under" system to a "skill + points" system. Suppose each character has a pool of points that can be spent on actions. This is similar to the charge-based system UA uses for magic, but it applies to mundane actions.

The question remains of how to gain charges. Maybe rest and maybe a meal is required. Maybe the character must perform some activity that is central to the character concept. Maybe they return at regular intervals of game (or maybe real) time. In the new Marvel game, the time is based on comic-book panels and the character's durability (iirc), but I cannot think of an appropriate unit of time for UA. Or maybe just use a zero-sum system like System DL uses.

## Zero-Sum Card-Based System

I came up with this card-based system on RPGnet as an idea for LARPs. I recently re-invented it thinking of ways to do diceless Unknown Armies.

Take a standard deck of cards and give each player, including the GM, one complete suit. If there are too many players, use multiple decks. This assumes character abilities ranked from 0 to 10 or something in that range. For different ability ranges, adjust the range of cards. For example, if abilities are rated from 0 to 5, you might use cards numbered 1-5 or 1-6.

When your character performs an action, play one of the cards face down to represent how much emotional stock and effort the character puts into to task and how much you want to succeed. Similarly, the GM plays a card to represent the NPC's effort or how much universe wants the character to fail.

You and GM reveal cards at the same time. Your card value is added the character's ability level while the GM's is added to the difficulty or opposing ability level. Your character succeeds if your total is higher than the GM's.

After the action is resolved, you and the GM swap cards. Thus, if you use an 8 on an action and the GM uses a 2, you will probably succeed, but then you lose the 8 and get the 2. After you gain a card in the exchange, you can use it immediately for your next action.

When two PCs go up against each other, such as in a LARP, the two players select cards, compare totals, resolve the outcome, and then exchange cards.

The big drawback of card-based systems is that players really dislike low cards and will do what they can to get rid of them or never play them at all. I am not sure this will not be the case in this system, but it has some features that might help. Players cannot "dump" low value cards on trivial actions because the other player or GM will just play low cards as well. Players who play low cards, risking failure, can possibly upgrade their decks by getting higher cards in return. Early in an adventure, players might play low cards, suffering initial setbacks, to gain better cards for use later, such as in the climatic or lynchpin scenes. On the other hand, a player has the option to never use low cards and potentially (and steadily) lose high cards to players who do use them.

As an optional rule, you can play more than one card on an action. The highest card goes to the GM or opposing player and the rest are discarded and cannot be used later. This option may be particularly important when combined with the SAGA-based damage system I describe below.

Any system where you choose which cards to play involves a meta-game element that is influenced by player skill and personal style. My system involves a layer of second-guessing beyond paper-rock-scissors, reminiscent of the game called Psychological Jujitsu (<http://www.icynic.com/~don/psych.html>).

Some may not feel comfortable with the GM setting the difficulty and choosing a card. For these folks or for campaigns set in an uncaring universe, the GM can simply draw a card randomly. This will eliminate the second-guessing nature of the card play, except players second-guessing themselves.

<sup>1</sup>: "UA got me thinking that it might be better served by a diceless game system, perhaps one using resource management."

## Using it Unknown Armies

Convert the stats to a 1-10 scale; only use the cards marked 1-10 and leave face cards out of it.. For untrained skills, I am tempted to say the skill value should be 0. For skill advancement, it might be helpful to keep track of the original percentage. For the purpose of shifts, treat each  $\pm 10\%$  as  $\pm 1$  to the ability score.

Any time you would get a flip-flop on a roll based on standard UA rules, you have the option to wait for the GM (or other player) to reveal a card before choosing your own. You still will probably not know the total you have to beat, but at least you will see the card you will get and can better make a guess on the total you have to beat.

Matches occur when the players reveal cards with identical values (two 2s, two 10s, etc.).

Translating the UA initiative systems seems clunkier than it is worth. Rather, have characters act in order of speed, with the highest speed acting first. Players may burn a card to increase the speed score and act sooner.

For weapon damage, I like the idea that those with lower skill values tend to do less damage when they do hit. To reflect this, the base damage from an attack is inversely proportional to the card played by the attacker. Normal damage maxima and minima apply.

In each case, add the value of the defender's card to the damage done. So if the attacker and target play a 7 and 4, respectively, the base damage would be 8 for a melee weapon and 44 for a gun. Both combatants have some incentive to play the lowest card that will succeed.

	Hand-to-hand	Firearms
A	10+	100+
2	9+	90+
3	8+	80+
4	7+	70+
5	6+	60+
6	5+	50+
7	4+	40+
8	3+	30+
9	2+	20+
10	1+	10+

Notice the base damage of firearms is just ten times that of hand-to-hand attacks. As an optional rule to simulate different weapons, you can use a different multiplier. For example, a chainsaw might do 8 times base hand-to-hand damage while a knife might do 2 or 3 times. After applying the multiplier, add the defender's card as normal.

You can use the standard UA GM-controlled hit point system or use a system blatantly stolen from TSR's SAGA system.

Subtract your Body (and the value of any armor) from the damage delivered. If this reduces the damage to 0 or less, you take no damage. Thus, you may be able to shrug off some punches but are very unlikely to ignore damage from a gun or other weapon.

Discard cards from your hand such that the sum total equals or exceeds the damage done. If you get shot for 63 points of damage and you have a body of 5, you have to discard 58 points worth of cards. You cannot "make change" so that if you take 13 points of damage and only have a 2, 8, and 10, you have to discard the 8 and 10 and do not get a 5 back. Discarded cards are set aside and cannot be used until the character heals.

With a hand of 10 cards distributed evenly, each character would have the equivalent 55 hit points. I am not sure this is too few or too many. I like the way it adds incentive to not only save some high cards to soak up damage rather than use them for actions, but also to use and trade up low cards.

Re: The combat system from my last zine

## Assumptions

I do not think I did a good job last time of explaining my assumptions. I am particularly interested to know if any of these sound off-base.

1. When one is engaged in Melee, it encompasses both offensive and defensive maneuvers. Not only are you trying to avoid being hit, but also the very act of making an attack is a defense against attack. Melee defense includes parrying, dodging, and the threat of attack.

2. Marksmanship only entails an offensive action. Unless you actively use Athletics to dodge (and thus use two actions), you gain no defensive benefit from firing a ranged weapon. Of course, threatening people with a weapon may entice them to dodge, which may throw off their own ranged attacks, but this is not the same as the active defensive maneuvering you get with Melee.

3. There are four ways to defend against ranged attacks: hope they miss (it helps to have range, cover, etc.), use Athletics to move and make yourself a harder target (but that also makes it more difficult for you to fire), counter with a Melee attack, counter with your own ranged attack and hope you hit first and for enough effect to throw off their shot.

4. Using Athletics to dodge is an overt action that includes diving for cover, ducking, juking, running or doing backflips away from the attack, cartwheeling around the opponent, and any other action that gets you out of the way of the attack or makes you harder to hit. It in no way involves any action that could potentially directly harm the opponent (for that, use Melee).

5. Using Melee or Marksmanship against two or more opponents counts as two or more actions. Using Athletics counts as one action no matter how many people are involved. Therefore, an effective way to fight a mob is to use Melee/Marksmanship against one and Athletics against the rest. You keep doing this until you whittle down the mob, one-by-one.

## Simultaneous Strikes

Based on comments from Paul Cardwell and Joshua Kronengold, here is a stab at rules to allow for simultaneous hits in a combat round. To review, two swordsmen engaged in battle would not make separate attack and defense rolls. Rather, each would make Melee rolls and the winner would get some form of advantage which could be used tactically or to wound the opponent. This simple mechanic eliminates the need for initiative rolls and breaks the pattern of "He hits. I dodge" rolls that was the igtheme way back in April. You can see a similar idea in Fudge.

However, as written, it does not allow for both to hit. Fudge works around this by allowing one to increase the offensive modifier while lowering defense, but this does not jive with Josh's comments in Issue #337.

Option 1: When the two fighters tie, roll a die. Some percentage of the time, the tie results in them both striking each other.

Option 2: Before making the combat roll, describe the fighter's stance. If the two fighters tie, the GM compares their stances and determines if there was a simultaneous strike. This could be an informal judgment or something based on a chart with specific stances and how they interact. For example, "aggressive vs. aggressive" or "high vs. low" might result in a simultaneous strike.

Whichever option is used, the damage is based on their Melee rolls with higher rolls doing more damage. This means that two highly skilled fighters who tie will tend to do more damage to each other than those with lesser ability.

## Loaded<sup>2</sup> and Favored Dice

I posed this question to RPGnet in a thread about using loaded dice and got no response. Brian Misiaszek's comments last issue about "lucky dice" is related to this.

I think we all agree that using loaded dice, dice designed to roll better than balanced dice, is akin to cheating (unless the use of such dice is condoned, of course). Most gamers have their favorite dice which they think roll better than average, or stop using dice that are rolling poorly, or even perform rituals to make the dice roll better. Ethically, what is the difference? Is not using dice you truly believe roll better just as reprehensible as using dice designed to roll better?

When I posed this question during a game at ConQuest, no one seemed interested except one player who insisted that so long as he did not do anything to make the dice roll better, if they rolled better through

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<sup>2</sup>: "Loaded dice" includes dice that are weighted or shaved to land a particular way and those whose numerical values have been altered (such as a d20 that has its 1 replaced by another 20).

no fault of his, then there was no problem. When I pressed him further on the ethical or philosophical difference between that and using dice he himself loaded, he bailed saying he never studied philosophy. I am very disturbed by this mentality. It seems to me that some (if not the vast majority of) gamers are in denial when it comes to the ethics of die rolling.

One could also say that very few dice are truly "accidentally loaded" and that any preference gamers place on dice is pure superstition, but I contend if gamers truly believe their dice are better, it does not matter whether the dice roll better or not—the ethics are the same. If someone hands you dice saying they are loaded and you knowingly use them, you are at least guilty of attempted cheating if the dice are not really loaded.

One could argue that if everyone, including the GM, uses favored dice, then the act is implicitly condoned and therefore acceptable. If cheating is allowed, it is no longer cheating. The use of "lucky dice" is part of the gaming culture and almost expected, but does that make it right?

## Comments #336

### Robert A Dushay, PhD

Eugene's duplicates could recombine at touch. The newly formed Eugene would have the collective memories of both duplicates.

Six (or eight) hours is typical for a Bay Area convention game. Regarding the trek home, it should be included if the trek adds to the richness of the game. In my experience, most convention games end about thirty seconds after the climax of the adventure, so unless the climax is in the trek home, then it probably should not be included.

### Lee Gold

Pidgin and trade languages explain "thieves cant" and would work with D&D alignment languages if alignments represented secret societies or organizations. As it is, I cannot accept a Paladin being able to speak "Lawful Good" to a blink dog.

### Spike Y Jones

Besides adding the Power Puff Girls theme to the properties, Chance cards, etc. were there any rules changes to PPG Monopoly?

### Joshua Kronengold

I do think it is "actively harmful to overdescribe a character's actions before the dice are rolled." This is why in my combat mechanics of last issue, I had the description come after the dice. Describing the outcome before the determination of success is made leads to gaps between what the player initially said and what really happened. This makes the narrative awkward and prone to clarifications. Plus, it puts the

GM in the uncomfortable position of having to correct the player by describing what really happened.

### Paul Mason

I have long been aware of the effects of using different printers. Even so, several of my old zines that I printed to a PDF writer have horribly placed column and page breaks. I just went back and re-PDFed them to make them look better.

When using a term like “immersive” I think we should be careful to explain in what exactly we want to be immersed. Character? Setting? Story? The act of playing a game? For example, the immersion Mike Kubit described may not be the kind that you want.

### Lisa Padol

I use a simplistic distinction between sf and fantasy based on if the answer to the question, “Why does this work?” is technology or magic. A common SF theme is “what are the consequences of this technology?” Asking “what are the consequences of this magic?” is not as popular in fantasy, though it has been done.

Except for “define your own skills” systems, I cannot think of any rpg that fully addresses telescoping skills based on genre. Tri-Stat, for example, adjusts the skill cost, but not the skill breadth. Savage Worlds allows the players to create knowledge skills as broad or specific as they like, but does not use this technique with other skills (as far as I know).

You can take any skill and break it up into more specific skills, but this does not mean you should. Genre is one reason why you should, but without a compelling genre reason to do so, I see no benefit in distinguishing between chess- and checker-playing skills.

### Robert Rees

Escapism to me is removing oneself from the concerns and thoughts of “the real world” and immersing myself into something else. To that end, I can understand how someone would want an rpg to avoid topics and situations that might make them think about “the real world.”

If you know enough about the core rules to decode the jargon of a supplement, you can still find use in it without owning the main rulebook. For example, someone might buy a GURPS supplement without owning GURPS (though GURPS-Lite it is freely available online, so perhaps that is not the best example).

### Nathan Wagner

Welcome back.

Your character creation system is based on “allowing player choice” while removing the choice to make an optimized character. While there are basic things a designer can do to discourage min-maxing, such as avoiding obvious min-max choices, I feel the

ultimate responsibility is with the playing group and, in particular, the players themselves.

## Comments #337

### Myles Corcoran

Call me a roleplaying snob, but anyone capable of playing a romantic or sexual relationship does not need a book to show them how or to give them ideas.

### Robert A Dushay, PhD

Texts, like any object, only have the meaning that people place on them. Gold has no value except that people think it has value. But since texts represent so much more than a pretty rock, people invest a lot of emotion and personal stake in their meanings.

### Lee Gold

In Melee, Observation and Intelligence are used to estimate distance and movement speed, as with missile attacks, and to judge and anticipate opposing tactics.

### Scott Hagan

Welcome. While certainly not a great film, I thought *X-Men 2* was enjoyable. I expect any comic book or literary work translated to film to have significant changes as a result of adapting to the new medium, so I am tolerant of such changes. Given how many times characters and plot lines have been reinterpreted in comics over the decades, you cannot fault a film for creating yet another interpretation. I have not read *From Hell*, but it was a good film.

### Spike Y Jones

The “prime rule” has not been historically followed by the makers of polyhedral dice. I have seen many d20s, especially older ones, whose opposite sides did not add up to 21. Given the historical development of d20s,<sup>3</sup> I find it acceptable to have them numbered such that opposite sides end in the same digit (1/11, 2/12, 3/13, etc.). For d10s, should opposite sides add to 9 or 11 (do you treat the 0 as ten or zero)? For d4s, how should the prime rule be applied?

### Pum

Welcome back. Your PumQuest class/skill system sounds similar to Rolemaster.

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<sup>3</sup>: 1<sup>st</sup> generation d20s were numbered 0 to 9 twice, with opposite sides having the same value, and you had to color half of the sides differently to make them distinct. 2<sup>nd</sup> generation put a plus sign (+) in front of half the numbers. 3<sup>rd</sup> generation dice numbered the sides 1-20.