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More on Combat

Power versus Finesse

One could argue that a fighter who hits often but not for a lot of power is statistically identical, in the long run, to a fighter who hit rarely, but hits with a lot of power. In game terms, hitting ten times for 1 point of damage is the same as hitting once for 10 points of damage. Therefore, one could argue that power and finesse are essentially chrome. This is how OTE combat traits work, for example. However, this approach loses two elements from combat that may be important in capturing the feel and drama of fights.

When armor or similar forms of protection comes into play, the "hit often for low damage" fighters become less effective. Power may be required to overcome the opponent's defenses. One could allow the finesse fighter a chance to bypass armor with a well-placed blow, but the increased difficulty would reduce the overall number of blows and may require some form of tactical advantage before making this called shot to a weak point.

Combat is drama and if everyone is essentially the same, much of the drama is lost. A fight between Spider-Man and The Hulk should feel very different than between Spider-Man and Daredevil or The Hulk and Thor. While I do not suggest that combat ability should be broken down into its smallest component parts, I want to preserve the distinction between power and finesse, as most traditionally structured games do.

Weapon Damage

The damage delivered depends on the power and quality of the blow as well as the weapon. A hard, glancing blow will do less damage than a hard, well-placed blow. The exact same blow made with a cricket bat and an ax will have very different effects on the target. The trick is to find the right balance of these three factors. One could also throw armor into the mix, as armor has a different effect for different types of blows, but that is too detailed for most people.

Many, if not most, systems scale damage such that a strong, but normal, human can do as much damage with a punch as an average person does with a dagger (against an opponent without armor). This does not feel right to me, as the blade would seem have the greater damage potential unless the punch was of truly superhuman power. But what do I know—I do not actually have any experience to say how combat and damage really works in the real world or how it should work in a pseudo-realistic rpg.

Comments on #339

Robert Dushay

Understand that I dislike the obsession that gamers have about their dice. Pulling out the lucky dice (or other luck charms) and thereby improving character performance shifts the focus from roleplaying to the "players vs the GM" mentality that should have died out decades ago. Some gamers personify their dice more than their PCs! Most of all, I dislike gamers who brag about their lucky dice, such as GMs who try to intimidate players with their "killer dice."

Regarding the ethical question I posed, when I approach the situation logically, I think that using a die that can be shown to yield skewed results is no better than using loaded dice. Calling it "lucky" does not make it acceptable, nor is blinding yourself to the possibility you are using a skewed die. However, since the gaming culture supports the use of "lucky" dice, and I lack the fortitude to piss against that particular wind, I just go with the flow.

See also my comments to Joshua Kronengold.

Lee Gold

Taking cover and using concealment are two ways to "hope they miss" while increasing the odds of them missing. Relying on armor is a form of "hope they miss" with some protection in case they do not miss.

Linking Marksmanship with Melee is something that had never occurred to me and something that I do not want to do. While I can accept a broad "Athletics" ability that includes climbing, running, swimming, acrobatics, etc., or "Perception" that covers sight, hearing, searching, etc., having a single combat skill that combined hand-to-hand weapons with ranged weapons does not sit right with me.

Joshua Kronengold

Your comments regarding threat of attack are well taken. What one does in response to the threat determines the effectiveness of the threat. What happens if you ignore the threat? Not making a defensive maneuver, especially when behind cover and/or wearing armor, is a legitimate response to the threat of a missile attack that completely negates any defensive benefits of the threat. You can do the same in melee and make an aggressive maneuver, accepting the risk of injury. For example, if someone has the drop on you and is pointing a gun at you, you can attempt to grapple them. You will probably get shot, but if you are very good and quick, you might not.

My card-based system does limit damage based on skill level in much the same way that UA does. The only way to get high damage results is to play low cards, but you can only hit with low cards if you have a high skill. If the target number to hit the target is 11

and you have a skill of 4, you have to play a 7 or higher to succeed and this effectively caps the damage at 4/40. At closer range, the target number would be lower and the potential damage greater, which I think makes sense.

Paul Mason

Players can immerse themselves in playing D&D combat, counting off 5' steps and discussing tactics, without any connection to character or setting. See also Mike Kubit's distinction between "true rpgs" and "adventure games" in issue #334.

My comments on coolness were directed at gamers in general, which includes the subset who are game designers (even "nouveau types" and "forgers").

You could apply a penalty to a roll based on the severity of the assertion made. In combat, the penalty could be directly linked to the desired damage or tactical penalty to be applied to the target. If you want to do 4 points of damage or unbalance your opponent (for a -4 penalty), you would take a -4 penalty on your attack roll. To keep things descriptive and reduce the math, you might want to think in terms of three grades of wounds or advantage (light/small, moderate, severe/large) and/or use penalty/bonus dice instead of numeric penalties. If using the yin/yan system, penalty/bonus dice are extra yin/yan dice; either the extra dice are added to the existing dice (potentially leading to large numbers) or you roll all of them and only use the highest (keeping the spread at -5 to +5).

Brian Misiaszek

I see two problems with Hackmaster in the scenario you described. First, even if a called shot is missed, it is quite possible to hit the target elsewhere, such as missing the head because you hit the shoulder. Second, you should have some non-zero chance to hit. After all, if you had not taken a called shot and randomly hit the head on a hit location table, you would have had some non-zero chance of hitting. See my comments to Nathan Wagner, below.

Experience systems in rpgs are vastly overused and overrated, in my opinion. Character development is important, as change keeps the characters interesting, but this does not necessarily mean the characters' abilities should improve over time.

Lisa Padol

The Angel RPG had been delayed due to Fox dragging the approvals, so it did not go to the printer in mid October. It should be out and my campaign started by the time you read this. Since it uses the same system as Buffy, we were able to do our initial campaign preparations in advance of the actual game.

The cards never need to "refresh" because they are continuously swapped. You play a 7, the GM plays a 2. Before the next action, you take the 2 and the GM

takes the 7. Thus, at the beginning of each action, you always have 10 cards from which to choose.

By calling it a die lucky, you are admitting you think it is skewed (by accident, fate, telekinesis, or other means). If you can prove it is, how is this different than using a die that is intentionally skewed/loaded?

Bill Reger

Welcome, officially, to A&E. Peter finally wore you down? :) I greatly enjoyed both the SW game (one of the highlights of the con) and your write-up.

Regarding faith and cheating, I am reminded of the line from Dogma: "Glick's the kind of asshole that would bless his own clubs for a better game."

Simon Reeve

Thanks for the thoughts on solar sails. If the sail included photo-electric converters (especially ones that also worked on a variety of wavelengths and other non-photon particles in the solar wind), any potential heat build up could be converted to useful electricity.

From the quick research I did on it, solar sails do not tack against the wind the way sailing vessels do. Rather than use negative pressure to create an airfoil, solar sails angle the sail such that the solar wind and gravity from the star produce the desired velocity.

Brian Rogers

I have a policy when picking games at conventions to not choose a game that uses the phrase "What's the worst that could happen?" Sterling's Game sounds like a great idea but I would be completely intimidated. My choice would be Star Trek, I think.

Nathan Wagner

I have ran and played in diceless games where we do make it all up. Diceless play is very taxing mentally and while it can be exhilarating, it is always exhausting. Having rules, including dice, to help made decisions quickly and "objectively" relieves some of this burden. Problems develop when the rules are not quick enough or too objective (too random without consideration for what would be more interesting or fun). I tend toward light, loose rules that provide just enough structure to make good decisions without overshadowing or interfering with the roleplaying.

Since my focus is on roleplaying (and not storytelling), the rules should help me roleplay my character. I dislike rules that make it either impossible to do reasonable things (like searching for a trip wire) or possible to do unreasonable things (like surviving a 100' fall). Ability rolls should yield results consistent with my character's ability. Lucky or unlucky die rolls can create a discord between what your character should be able to do and the actual performance.