RPG REVIEW

Issue #15, March 2012

Indie Game Special: History, Design and Industry ... Liz Danforth Interview ... HeroQuest Reviews ... Indie Actual Play Reviews ... Tunnels & Trolls ... Character Development ... Pedagogy of Play ... Console Game Reviews .. Movie Review : John Carter... Industry News

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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EDITORIAL

Being two moths late in publications is a record even for an irregular, volunteer, magazine such as this one, with its nominal quarterly presentation. Nevertheless, I am pleased to say that much of the next issue is already in preparation, and I would not be surprised to see if it actually comes out on time.

Before discussing the content of this issue it is worth raising a question of some moral danger. What do barbie dolls, sex games, and Dungeons & Dragons have in common. Now if you come up with some obscure reference to Phil and Dixie from *The Dragon* and their never ending quest to actually cover "Sex in D&D", you are certainly deserving of grognard status. However the real answer is a rather unfortunate determination by Ebay that inclusion of any of the

above does not constitute a breach of their listing policies, because they are all potentially roleplaying.

It is an extraordinary set of correspondence, I submitted a complaint to Ebay that some sellers were clearly confused between "roleplaying games", which is meant to represent the sort of material that this 'zine covers, but instead also include dolls for children (instead of "pretend play"), and the Karma Sutra sex talk game (seriously, that was an item – I have no idea what category that was supposed to be in). The inclusion of doll's sets, toy trucks, Karma Sutra sex talk sets, and children's masks have absolutely nothing to do with our hobby. To allow such items in the category reduce the value of Ebay's service to customers who are doing the right thing by listing and searching in the correct category.

Enough of a rant of the disappointing behaviour of a corporation failing to satisfy its own policies, and on to the more pleasant topic of this issue of RPG Review, a special issue dedicated to independent roleplaying games of which yours truly has written a piece on the history and industry of such games. These are supplemented by several short reviews and actual play reports, largely led by Sean Nittner, who also contributes a sense of method of Pedagogy of Play. For Reviews we have two from Chris Romer from the poster-child of independent and narrativist games, HeroQuest2, along with Karl Brown giving an article on nationalities for his own indie game, Gulliver's Trading Company. Finally, Morgan Davie discusses the origin of character association in the course of a gaming episode in "The Bell" - nothing to do with the over of RPG Review, which is about independence of a different sort – maybe.

Our supplementary items this issue starts of with a real feature (yes, you can have a supplementary feature), an interview with Liz Danforth, artist and game developer of one the earliest indie RPGs, i.e., Tunnels & Trolls. (I must keep reminding myself when typing her name not to confuse with Liz Davenport). Matt Lindus contributes once again brief reviews of recent games to hit the console, Andrew Moshos with the relevant movies of late, and I'm putting my own hat in the ring with a book review. Last, but not least of course, is our gossip queen, Wu Mingshi.

With the sheer weight of publications, and especially indie game publications, now reaching in the level of dozens per year, we could quite clearly dedicate RPG Review to nothing else but independent RPGs, Of course we don't do that, but inevitably it does mean that this issue may not include personal favourites. For this we can but ask for forgiveness and humbly suggest a contributed article for our next issue, science fiction RPGs. There are, of course, quite a number of independent SF games which would be suitable – and for astute observers who noticed we had a SF theme in issue 8.. well, yes. That was two years ago, and it barely scratched the surface then. Rest assured there will be more, and more. Such is the nature of our ever-developing hobby.

But here's an issue; once upon a time game-designers wrote systems that were designed to last. Granted many were absolutely terrible, with appalling sense of game-balance and progression or destroying any suspension of disbelief by miserable failures at reality-checking, and a result crashed and burned a year after publication. Today, I cannot help but feel that the cleverness of many indie game designers, with the finely tuned sense of balance, narrative progression and tension, along with their capacity to at least avoid problems of verisimilitude, has lost something as well. So many games today are designed to be played for several sessions at best. Whilst I adore the punk do-it-yourself ethic, I would prefer designers to work more cooperatively (remember "Perrin, Stafford, Turney and others"?), and produce better games with deeper levels of granularity, and more lasting exploration. It is that hope I still have for independent games.

Onwards!

Lev Lafayette, lev@rpgreview.net

HOT GOSSIP : INDUSTRY NEWS

by Wu Mingshi

Aiyah!, Mr. Lev, I think you miss your own funeral. But on lah! Loyal friend Mingshi come to rescue and tell you an zhua!

First I pass up serious news. I know you like school stuff about roleplaying games, but boh tak chek for my mother tongue. Lah, I promise you every time no politic, but I like not my gahmen. But new books for four-eyes: "The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity", "The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games", "Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games", and "Worldbuilding For Writers, Gamers and Other Creators Volume One: Star, Planet, Moon". Why not you write book like this, Mr. Lev? You know bakero! Worldbuilding book by Matthew Wayne Selznick, others publish by McFarland.

You tell me next issue is science fiction again. Well, good! Many new books. Mongoose make 2300AD book for their Traveller. Mingshi think good idea, Mongoose Traveller is zai, and old Traveller have too many system and too many rules, and all very confusing. Mongoose Traveller achieve new watermark. Also, new RPG Degenesis is little like science fiction, but after disaster. Rain of asteroids on Earth! This one publish by Posthuman Studios, which sounds a little bit like what Mingshi want to grow up.

We so ak kah liao with Adamant Entertainment now they give us Soul-Thieves of Mars, adventure for Savage Worlds under the moons of Mars. Also even more kuku is Chuck Wendig and Evil Hat make Dinocalypse Now from Spirit of the Century. Prevent assasination of FDR! Confront psychic dinosaurs! Ah, la! Final story on science fantasy, Chaosium have new book for Basic Roleplaying call The Chronicles of Future Earth "where humankind brushes shoulders with beings and creatures strange and monstrous" and "the Venerable Autocracy of Sakara, the greatest — and oldest — Empire on Urth, rules over half the world, led by an immortal God-Emperor whose very word is law". Sound scary! But also sound like Hawkmoon. So good!

Final, Mingshi speak of 800 pound ang mor gao, also known as "Dungeons & Dragons". Maybe you play play once or twice? Well, Mingshi all blur with new announcement from Wizards of the Coast for Dungeons & Dragons fifth edition! All too soon, too soon, Mingshi thinks. Not even enough time to reach Epic Destiny yet, just make Paragon Path last week. Mingshi so sad now, maybe retire another character. Please take time for next edition Wizards, and put smile on Minghi's face, hor!

Enough for me this quartering! Bai!

Mingshi! (mingshi@rpgreview.net)
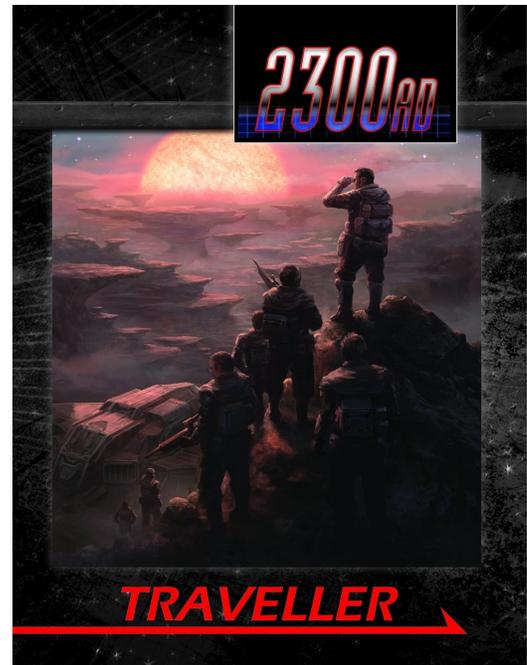
INTERVIEW WITH LIZ DANFORTH

with Liz Danforth

Elizabeth (Liz) Danforth has been an illustrator for role-playing games since the very beginning of the hobby. Most well known for her artwork through a variety of classic publications (e.g., Tunnels & Trolls, Traveller, Twilight 2000, MERP, Aria, Legend of the Five Rings, Deadlands and more)...

...I think I only worked on the ccg for Deadlands, although I discussed writing an Arizona-based book for it. They weren't really looking for location books and I had enough other things on my plate that I didn't pursue it further. I did GM a few games of it with our local group, and we had a blast.

There was the Deadlands: Reloaded GM Screen.... … but also as an author for others (Citybook, Dungeons & Dragons). Outside of RPGs, Danforth also did artwork for Magic: The Gathering, and the Middle Earth Collectible Card Game, as well as the scenario designer for Star Trek: 25th Anniversary computer game and Judgement Rights. Her clear line-and-ink medium has attracted great attention over the years, being invited as a guest of honour to a number of science fiction conventions, including including the North American science fiction convention held in Seattle in 2005. In 1996, Danforth was made a member of the Academy of Gaming Art and Design's Hall of Fame.

Liz Danforth as Guest of Honour at TusCon27

...and over a dozen other ccg titles, of which L5R and maybe 7th Sea are the better known ones...

, as well as the scenario designer for Star Trek: 25th Anniversary computer game and Judgment Rights.

Also Wasteland. I'd mention it in the interview since Wasteland 2 just got $3 million in Kickstarter funds, and I've been asked to work on the new game along with the rest of the original team.

Her clear line-and-ink medium has attracted great attention over the years, being invited as a guest of honour to a number of science fiction conventions, including including the North American science fiction convention held in Seattle in 2005. In 1996, Danforth was made a member of the Academy of Gaming Art and Design's Hall of Fame.

Q. Thank for joining us at RPG Review, Liz. You've been in the hobby for a long time now - would you care to tell us how it all started?

While still in college, I joined up with the local science

fiction club in Phoenix. Officially called the Cosmic Circle, it was also known as the Friday Night Inevitables. It was a gaggle of fun, creative, literate people who liked science fiction, fantasy, games, apas, writing, art, costuming, and all associated fannish activity. The sub-group of gamers played Risk, Regatta, and Diplomacy variants in the corner of the kitchen, and I was introduced to gaming as a hobby by them. I'd always played games with my family -- my dad was a gamer though wouldn't have called himself that -- so it was a natural move for me.

Among those gamers was Ken St Andre who, when he first wrote Tunnels & Trolls, shared it with that circle. I played it, liked it, and pretty soon gaming became my regular hobby because all my closest friends were gamers.

From there to moving into the industry professionally? As a regular science fiction/fantasy fan, I'd been doing artwork for fanzines from early on. Because I often carried a sketchbook with me, and my friends knew what kind of artwork I did, Ken recommended my art to Rick Loomis of Flying Buffalo, who was distributing those early editions of T&T. My first job for FBInc was a cover for one of Rick's small magazines about his PBM games, as I recall. I did art for the early T&T solos, and then for Metagaming's edition of Monsters! Monsters! (which was when the T&T-based spin-off where monsters got payback on all the dungeon delvers laying waste to their cozy underground homes). Steve Jackson was the art director for Metagaming back then, and had me do his first edition of Melee, the game that eventually led to Fantasy Trip and GURPS.

In time, Rick hired me full time, mainly as staff artist and art director, but really for almost any work that needed to be done. I wore many hats in the seven years I was there, including several years running the Blade Division of FBInc, the publishing arm of FBInc. Rick allowed staff to freelance on the side and since I was attending a lot of gaming conventions -- Origins, GenCon, and others -- I learned the ropes of who published what, and started doing at least a little work for almost everyone doing interesting games.

Q. In the early editions of Sorcerer's Apprentice (issues 2 to 5) you wrote a number of articles on Tunnels & Trolls. Can you give us a summary on your attraction and advocacy of that game system?

Simple and fun and elegant. T&T was the second RPG on the market, after Ken looked at Chainmail (as I recall) and said "This is too darn complicated, but there's a good idea at the core so let's see what we can do with that and skip the rest."

T&T didn't try to be historically realistic and some of the material was downright irreverent in tone, which got us a lot of snarky comments over the years. Frankly, we didn't care. Games are fundamentally about entertainment, and the mechanics were sufficient as a vehicle for role-playing married with our active imaginations, without getting bogged down in dice rolls and endless charts.

I've been intrigued to watch a renaissance of T&T in recent years. There is a remarkably solid cadre of very devoted fans of the game, keeping it alive with new material, blogs and listservs, and fond memories of the game. New translations are being done, in French and German, with new art. The rules/edition wars of old have faded, and people are happy to play whatever system they can enjoy together with friends. To me, that seems like the whole point.

Q. You also acted as editor for a number of T&T editions, as well as being an artist and editor for a number of scenarios. Is there more than a little bit of your work in T&T?

You could say that, yes -- "a little bit."

I am listed as "editor" of the game's Fifth Edition, because the term "game developer" wasn't in our collective parlance at the time. That is the term I would use now. Tunnels & Trolls is emphatically Ken's brainchild, not mine -- I wouldn't take a single thing away from him in that regard. But after he had done four editions, each marginally different from one another, Ken and the gaming crew and Flying Buffalo all knew the game had a lot more potential than it was reaching. I took on the task of pulling all the tweaks together, plus a certain amount of the gang's house rules and variations, and what I considered the best practices of how RPGs and board games were being presented at the time. I rewrote a new edition from front to back, expanding and elaborating on it considerably while explaining things in greater detail than had gone before. It was completely re-illustrated and became the definitive edition for a very long time. People still tell me they use it as their core ruleset, adding select tidbits from later editions.

As one of the core people of the Blade division, I took on some of the development or (true) editing jobs for other projects like working on some Grimtooth's Traps and Citybooks, and probably worked at least a little on most of the projects that came down the pike at that time. But it was a very collaborative and cooperative time, with many creative people in the office. I don't think there was any other project that got my wholesale attention the way T&T's Fifth Edition did, though.

Q. You've also done some other work, for example contributions in the acclaimed Citybooks, but also notice The Northern Reaches region module for D&D Mystara - with none other than Ken Rolston. Does that particular publication stand out in your memory? How was working with Ken?

When I saw you mentioned that I "worked on D&D" as an author in the intro, I thought "WTF is he thinking??" ... and then saw you were referring to this Northern Reaches piece. It was such a delightful little sidebar thing Ken Rolston had me do, yet I tend to forget. TSR brought me on officially just as his editor. (I was freelancing as an editor for them quite a bit at the time, for Jeff Grubb, Nigel Findlay, Bob Salvatore, Zeb Cook and others.). My comments and questions on his material grew, flying back and forth, because it's an historical time/place I knew a little bit about. He asked me to fill out the ideas I was tossing around ... so I did. He was a complete delight to work with and I'm sorry circumstances never brought us together on anything else.

From Tunnels & Trolls

Q. Your artwork appeared in quite a range of publications, and usually in context. Did you play those games? The Traveller Adventure? Dwarven Halls for Swordbearer? Arnor for MERP? Aria?

I did play a little Traveller, but the other games you mention -- no. By then, the gang of friends I'd played within the past had largely dispersed. I still played a litlle this and that -- I remember playing Champions, TORG, Deadlands, MSPE, Shadowrun. But as long as the company would send me text to read and refer to, I could fit the specifics of the art to the game. I had some excellent art directors at the time, too, and that makes end results much better for all concerned.

Q. Your style has remained very consistent over the years – detailed line-and-ink with a high degree of sketch-realism. Do you think that the quality and creativity of RPG artwork has improved over the years? Is there any new contemporary artists that stand out to you?

I think I envy the artists working today, foremost because they are asked for a lot more color than I ever had the opportunity to do until Magic cards came along and allowed me to paint regularly. Even doing half-tone work was problematic for many publishers because (back then) it could cost a little more or require slightly different printing methods. I did some halftone full pages that I still love to look at, but that was a rarity.

Don't get me wrong -- I like the linear inkwork that I do, but I also thrive on variety and new challenges. But mostly I am asked for what the art directors are most familiar with, which is my linework. I am rather out of the loop these days, not getting out to conventions to see many of the new RPGs, so I'm not familiar with the artists working today. What I have seen, when I've gone into game stores and such, is that the standards are uniformly high and the artwork I see is breathtaking.

Q. One other matter of your artwork is that the characters, especially the female characters, seem to wearing the requisite amount of clothing as a norm, and are without twentieth century make-up or high-heeled boots. This does contrast with the various bare-chested characters that are common in fantasy art. Do you think the gaming industry is, at least to some degree, sexist? Has the situation improved over the years?

This is not a simple question to answer, and requires a great many caveats and yes-but's. Personally, I have not found the tabletop industry people any more sexist than society as a whole, and honestly I've found many male gamers (speaking of tabletop gamers in this case) less sexist than I expect of random strangers.

The video game industry people I have dealt with have not been sexist in their behaviors, nor have I experienced gender discrimination. In fact, I am aware of how vocally the video game industry is asking for women to join their ranks. (Whether women get hired and thrive may be a different question. A few clearly do.)

Still, I have indeed seen, experienced, and most certainly heard of the most appallingly sexist and misogynistic events, particularly in online gaming. I find some of the visuals beyond cringe-worthy, particularly in regards to female costuming. My own costuming was never a political statement; it just was whatever seemed to fit the assignment and what I happened to think up. I have half-naked women but I also have half-naked men as often as both are armored, geared, and dressed to the nines.

It does seem to be more an issue today than in the past, though. The fact that the same clothing in WoW sometimes

looks significantly different on a male toon and a female makes me roll my eyes (at best). A male friend of mine uses transmogrification to keep his female character looking "decent." (I think that says as much about him as about the game, though.) The Sailor Moon shorty skirts in Guild Wars 2 leaves me unwilling to play my favorite class (at least not as a female avatar) because I cannot stand to look at the character dressed like that. Conversely, the popular Tumblr of "women in reasonable armor" evidences no lack of examples. You can focus on what you wish to, for whatever reason you wish to.

Beyond that, I think the relative anonymity of online gaming brings out the worst locker room sexism and casual hostility among some online gamers. Throw in a heavy dose of adrenaline from ganking or being ganked, and players snarl "Fuck civility, I'm here to kick butt and have fun; don't fuck me with me, fucktard." And that's the polite version. It turns me off, but I've sworn the air blue a time or two myself.

Have things improved over the years? I have to counter with the question "in what way, exactly?"

The first year I walked into Origins Game Convention, I literally had my breasts stared at by grinagogs. I was amused but not in a funny-haha way. Again, context is relevant: that wasn't uncommon for any young 20-something in the late 70s in the US (and probably not these days either). But what did change in a good way was that year by year, I saw more and more women attending, playing and participating, working and contributing in the industry. Women's assumptions about what a gamer was might have kept us out, or societal pressures against being too geeky, but personally I did not see raw sexism or misogyny keeping interested gamer-females from doing what they wished to do.

As long as this answer is, it doesn't begin to scratch the surface of this topic.

Q. Now, obviously all this is regrettably insufficient for a living wage. Tell us a little about your day job.

Careful about "obviously." Most of my career, I've been lucky or hard-working enough that the "day job" mainly evens out the inevitable ups and downs of freelance income, with most of my income derived from my freelance work.

That said, for over 20 years I have worked part time for libraries in Phoenix and Tucson. I got my masters degree a few years ago (MLS) when life handed me a truckload of rotten lemons, thinking I should do library work full time and give up freelancing. After a few years of that, I went back to half time. I genuinely love library work that makes such a huge difference in people's lives, but my drive to make things, write things, do art, and be the master of my fate (ha!) means the library has to share me with being a freelancer. I'll note that I spent four years as a full time freelancer back in the 90s, and had the same feeling ... libraries and freelancing complement my drives, and I don't really wish to do simply one or the other.

Q. What advice do you have for an enthusiastic would-be RPG artist?

Work hard, never do less than your best because you will always be judged -- and haunted -- by your worst work. If you feel you can't afford the time to do it right, turn the job down. If you take it, then give it your all.

HEROQUEST 2 REVIEW

by Chris Jensen Romer

About the Reviewer

It's probably helpful to know a little about my background, to let you see my prejudices. I first came to Runequest and Glorantha in the late 1970′s or early 80′s, and have always been a huge fan of the Basic Roleplaying System, but was from the start bewildered by the incredible depth of the Glorantha world setting. Having some serious Glorantha geeks around me always left me a little put off — simply because I did not know the difference between Yellow, Brown and Green Aldryami for example, and would have (until quite recently) struggled to locate Fronela or the city of Nochet on a map. The amazing strength of Glorantha as a world setting is this depth, and the incredibly esoteric discussions of deep background on the Glorantha email lists – but it is also a major problem to someone like me who likes to know a setting, and explore it, but who as a GM always felt put off by my lack of knowledge. Then, many of the publications that set Gloranthan canon were out of print, or hard to obtain. Finally Runequest in all its versions has a ponderously slow (to my mind) combat system, and so I was never a Glorantha/RQ fan boy.

Then I discovered Heroquest. The received wisdom in my district among gamers was that Hero Wars, its predecessor, was a buggy, difficult and awkward system, with many failings.

I have never actually played it, but I am a huge fan of the trade paperback books that were produced for that edition — but on reading the Hero Wars rules, a new game system set in Glorantha, my brain shut down. (I did exactly the same when first exposed to Ars Magica mind you, and did not come back to it for a decade. I eventually got it, and now am an established author for the 5th edition Ars Magica line with many credits, and a HUGE fan. Never let a negative first impression put you off!) Anyway I really did not get Hero Wars, so when Heroquest first edition was released it took me a very long time to pick it up, but when I did I was blown away, in a good sense. You can read my review here.

I actually eventually discovered in play many problems with the system, or what I perceived as problems. For that reason I have left posting this full playtest review a long time — because I wanted to see if extensive exposure to the HQ2 system would prove similarly disappointing. As I only review games i really enjoy, you can probably guess it did not, but there is a years worth of gaming experience and three shirt campaigns reflected in this review. I'm still learning though, and ask questions on simple things on the HQ2 yahoogroup quite often, so I'm no expert.

My rpg theory background would place me fully in the Simulationist camp, with a bit of narrativism and gamism chucked in for those who care about such things. I have experimented with many indie rpgs, and enjoyed them, but ultimately am at heart an old style grognard. I have played the game with 12 people, and would say that 10 of them fit that description, one had not gamed before and one is unashamedly narrativist. All enjoyed the experience, and one wrote the following for me as a comment when I told him I was writing a review (I cited it in my previous review if it seems familiar) –

"Love the system. Really flexible on character generation and storytelling. Gave me the ability to try something really challenging and leftfield which was certainly immersive, escapist, liberating and highly enjoyable. I'll stop now before this ends up is "Pseud's Corner" in Private Eye."

Enough about me – I just hope this allows you to make a more considered judgment of my review…

What kind of games can you run with it?

Pretty much any you can imagine, in ANY setting. This is the second edition of Heroquest, which in turn was based on an earlier game Hero Wars.Both those games were set specifically in one fantasy setting – Greg Stafford's evocative world, Glorantha. This new edition of the rules does contain a small section on playing Heroquest 2.0 in Glorantha, which covers basics of magic etc, but these rules are truly multi-genre – and without much real immediate obvious need for setting packs. You can run any story you can imagine with them – because they abstract the technology and vehicles etc in terms of their role in your story, NOT a simulationist attempt to define how they would work in reality. If you want starship construction rules, stats for a hundred different guns, and a detailed approach to armour and movement and maneuver rules, this is NOT the game for you. Chaosium's Basic Roleplaying might be a better bet, or GURPS? Heroquest 1.0 might also work better for you.

However, my gaming style is simulationist, and I actually have run HQ2 in a very simulationist manner: the crunch is not as important, but I can still narrate in a way that reflects a simulation of a physical universe. I have run a heist based game, which I intended to be cinematic, but actually was by the end of it more like a modern gangster movie, gritty and realistic. It worked just fine: one thing I have learned from playing is that the GM decides if any game is say Space Opera like Star Wars, or hard SF like Asimov's novels – simulation is a function of narration and what tests you call for, not necessarily down to rules system or what game developers often term "crunch"

Heroquest 2.0 is unashamedly a game about stories and characters, where the genre defines the way the game runs — and the styles that can be supported range from satire to cinematic to gritty realism or even tragic operetta. The GM and the players set the tone, as is the case in any rpg, which whatever the authors intentions can be played from Beer n Pretzels style through to skirmish wargame style. I have played Ars Magica games that run the full spectrum, and I have run Heroquest games that range from my heist-movie series gritty realism through to the more cinematic Bonnie and Clyde game and the deeply immersive Colymar campaign set in Glorantha.

As you may have gathered, not having to play HQ2 in Glorantha was a big bonus to me, though all that changed when Moon Designs "reset the canon" and made Glorantha way more accessible with Sartar: Kingdom of Heroes and The Sartar Companion. My reviews of those will follow, but I am finally an unashamed Gloranthan fan-boy owing to the accessibility and beauty of those books.

Character Generation

Let me give an example from my heist movie game "Gone on the Fourth of July". There are three methods given in the rules – a list method, where you choose ten abilities (and possibly a couple of Keywords, described below), a narrative method where you write 100 words about your character and then derive abilities from that, and a "fill it in as you go method". Keywords start at 17, other abilities at 13, and then you divide 20 points among them, with no more than 10 points going on any one ability.

We used the 100 word method. As one player turned up late I was tempted to use method 3 for him, and I asked another

if he would like to try the List method as he usually finds that easier, but in the end all the players elected to use the 100 word method 1. Given the game's cinematic roots I said clichéd stereotypes were just fine for the heist characters, if they wanted to play them. We put on the tracks Self Preservation Society, I Fought the Law (Clash version) and Scooby Snacks and we were off…

Lloyd played Jake Malone. His hundred words read

"Jake Malone has been involved with crime since he was a teenager. Stealing cars and armed robbery is his game. He stole his first car at 14 but has gone on to become an excellent wheelman. He lives a playboy lifestyle, fast cars and charming even faster women. He enjoys all the benefits of a criminal lifestyle. Jake is a cockney wide-boy through and through, growing up on the mean streets of the East End, ducking and diving with the best of them. Jake hates the pigs and any form of authority. He would rather die than go to jail. "

I decided to help him interpret these in to a character sheet, and we came up with a decent fun character. His keyword was Wheelman, which we decided we would assign 5 sub-skills, and the italicized bits were his two flaws. Here is Lloyd's character as it was after the first session, with a few hero points expended on increasing abilities…

Jake Malone

Wheelman 3W(Keyword)

East End Criminal Contacts 13

Acquire Hot Goods 13

Playboy Lifestyle 13

Gone in 60 Seconds 18

'andle A Shooter 13

Owns Hottest Sh*t on the Road 13

Charm the Knickers Off A Nun 18

Contacts: Sound of Bow Bells 13

Streetwise 13

A Little Bit Woo, A Little Bit Wah 13

The Knowledge 13

Gift of the Gab 13

Sharp Dressed Man 13

Flaws

They'll Never Take Me Alive 3W

Rebel Without a Cause 18

HeroQuest

By Robin D. Laws

Moon Design Publications
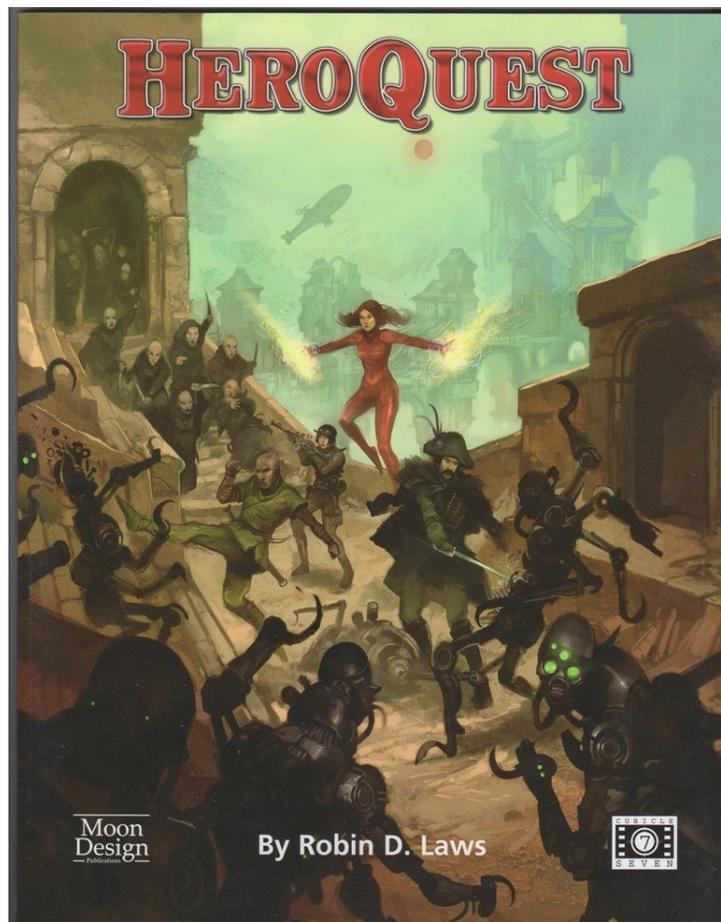
The W symbol by the Keyword and the Flaw should be a mastery rune, and adds 20 to the ability. So Jake really has the ability Wheelman 23, in normal terms, but a mastery level has a specific game role, explained under contests below. Note the abilities, all invented by the player, are written in (bad) cockney argot, to reflect the mood of the game. We all understood whgat was intended by them, but having something ambiguous like Erenessa's (below) Copper Bar of Truth is just fine: it was defined what it did when she first used it in a story.

Now an odd bit about this character. Firstly, it has a lot more than ten abilities. That is because of the way we derived the abilities from the 100 words, and because Lloyd the player decided to spend Hero Points, the experience points of the system, to buy a couple more in keeping with his character after the first session. Secondly, the ability Wheelman (basically "getaway driver") is a Keyword. In HQ1 Keywords came with a list of breakout abilities, something like –

Drive like a Bat out of Hell (break out ability)

Plan the Perfect Score (break out ability)

Getaway Driver (break out ability)

Two Wheels Through Alley (break out ability)

Chop Shop & Respray (break out ability)

All of which could run off the Keyword, but which could be improved individually too. That is still true in HQ2, but there is no defined list of break out abilities for any Keyword. I was surprised, but this worked really well in play, and it is entirely possible, and normal, to create a character with such breakout abilities. Here is one from my run of the Colymar campaign, to show what a Gloranthan character looks like in HQ2 terms, after 7 sessions…

Erenessa, Initiate of Issaries (Communication)

Keywords

   Earth Rune 17

   Truth Rune 17

   Communication Rune 1W

   Issaries Trader +1

   Darktoungue +1

   Member of Orlmarthing Clan 20

   *Herd Carnivorous Plants (clan secret: spell) +1

   Lawgiver (Occupation) 1W

   *Convincing +1

   *Legal Precedents +1

From the King of Dragon Pass computer game

*Oratory+1

*History of Sartar+1

*Matchmaker +1

Abilities

Hit it with my Bludgeon 1W

Hear Gossip and Remember It 18

Swoon Dramatically in to Handsome Fellows Arms (talent) 16

Know the Cowardly Ways of Ducks 13

Impressive Silver Arm Ring 13

Geography of Sartar 13

Betrothed to Ingar of the Hiording 15

Trusted by Termertain 14

The Copper Bar of Truth (magic item) 13

Haggling spell 13

Troll friend 15

Evaluate Lead Goods 13

Flaws

Matrimonial ambitions 13

Can not tell a lie 1W

Note the abilities marked *, which are all breakouts chosen by her player based on the Lawgiver Keyword. When it is raised, which costs twice as many points as to raise any other ability, they are all raised — but they can also be raised individually. For a full description of how all this works in Glorantha, see my review of Sartar Kingdom of Heroes.

Character generation is a lot of fun, and i have seen some wonderful characters created. I cite these two simply because I happened to have them to hand! The ability to create any ability, be it an item, magical power, skill in normal rpg terms, relationship or personality trait and handle them all with the same system (and augment each other with them) is really fun and rewards player creativity.

Contests

One of the oddest things to an old gamer like me about HQ2 and its predecessors has always been that the GM rolls a resistance to every single ability check. This really jars at first, and when I first ran it (well the first two campaigns I ran) I did what I normally do, and just told the players what dice to roll, and what the results were, and they were curious about why I was rolling each time as well. I thought understanding the mechanics was not important – though I always explained when a Hero point could be spent to their benefit. It worked OK, but felt odd.

Now actually in my third game we started like that, but soon the players wanted to know what a Mastery level meant, and what my die rolls were for. I explained the whole mechanics properly, taking time to show them, as I roll the dice openly they started to get involved in understanding the mechanics that led to their marginal victory or whatever. And you know what? They loved it!

I had avoided explaining the system because I like players to concentrate on the story, but understanding the rules was enabling, letting them feel they were in a game not just a narrative made up by me as I went along. HQ2 seems rules light when you first read it, but like many good games the rules have a lot of hidden complexity, and I now appreciate the players want to understand them. It's really easy to teach HQ2, and for a couple of sessions you might not even need to, but for people who have played a lot of systems understanding the "crunch" adds to their enjoyment.

For those interested in the mechanics: the game uses a D20, and you try to roll low, with 1 a critical, 20 a fumble. You try to roll under the relevant ability, which is modified by lingering bonuses and penalties (see below) and augments, where you roll a second skill that may be relevant to try and get a bonus.

Let's give an example… Jake (played by Lloyd) above has been rumbled as he tries to listen in to a rival gang's discussion in a dodgy boozer. As a couple of thugs run after him, he leaves and jumps in his car, taking off at breakneck speed through the street of London. The thugs follow on motorbikes. Firstly we have to decide what is at stake in the contest. The Thugs want to catch him and 'ave a word, and eventually he is going to get stuck in traffic. Jake is trying to get away. This is easy: the contest has two opposed outcomes – either the thugs catch him or they don't. I decide the difficulty will be standard, which for this session is 15, so the thugs have an ability of 15. I will treat both as a pair for this simple contest. Now we need to establish the number Lloyd is rolling against to see if Jake escapes – he has 3W, so 23, but he wants to augment this with his "Owns Hottest Sh*t on the Road 13″ ability. So first we roll a quick contest, against a base resistance for an augment this session of 14. I roll 14, a success, as narrator. Lloyd rolls 19, a failure — having a fast car won't help this time, as he gets no benefit from the augment. I describe how heavy traffic means he just can't use that speed. We now roll to see if he can outrun the bikers – they have an ability of 15, he 3W.

Now the weird bit. Ignore the mastery for now – the W. Lloyd needs to roll under 3, I need to roll under 17. I roll a 12, a success; Lloyd rolls an 8, a fail. Now the Mastery cuts in – Lloyds result is bumped from a Fail to a Success, and so both parties succeed. Lloyd rolled lower, and so he gets a marginal victory — in this case he gets away, but the pursuers got a good look at him and his car. I would let Lloyd narrate what a marginal victory means. My explanation is not very clear, but soon you don't need to refer to the tables in the book and it all becomes very easy to use.

In this instance, Jake also might get a Lingering Bonus of +3 to an ability in a similar situation, which lasts till he fails using that ability. I think I'd give him +3 to outrun bikes, or drive in traffic, either of which would run off his Wheelman keyword. These are not abilities — just bonuses that are temporary, and reflect his success in this kind of thing. Wounds are similar, but penalties to the ability that is wounded. If Jake gets slashed across the face in a scrap, his "Charm the Knickers Off A Nun 18″ might take a lingering penalty till he can get stitched up, made up or perhaps have plastic surgery. If his car gets smashed up, his "Owns Hottest Sh*t on the Road 13″ suffers a penalty — in a complete defeat it might "die" as his car is a write off, and we just scrub it off his character sheet.

Now imagine we were going to run this as an extended contest, the most important part of the session. How it works is

a succession of simple contests, but each one gives points to the side that wins – a marginal victory 1, a minor victory 2, a major victory 3 and a complete success (fumble versus crit) 5. First to 5 wins; there are rules for assistance from other player characters, each round needs a new exciting augment; his ability The Knowledge refers to the test London cab drivers have to take to show they know their way round the city, so that would be entirely appropriate for instance, or in desperation he could wave his gun at the bikers, using "handle a shooter" to try and intimidate them. There are rules for Extended Group Contests, and loads of great advice on running contests in the book. I hope my attempt at explanation has not put anyone off!

There is one other aspect of the system that needs a little attention though. Like most games, if a skill is not directly applicable, or is a "stretch" as the rules term it, then you can attempt it at a penalty. Jake has "East End Criminal Contacts 13″, but he needs to make contact with a gang member who is part of a mob South of the River Thames. He asks if he knows anyone down there — I decide this is a minor stretch, and maybe give him a -3 penalty. If however he wants to know a West End white collar criminal with a knowledge of bank fraud, well that is a real stretch – he will have a penalty of -6. If he wants to know a crook from Cardiff, I might just rule the ability is useless — it's too far from his home turf. However, imagine a situation where Jake is trying to acquire some stolen jewellery to give to his annoyed girlfriend. This can clearly run off his "Acquire Hot Goods 13″ ability, and he can augment with several other abilities, not least the criminal contacts one. However Lynzi, Sam's character is a professional jewel thief. She has "Fence Stolen Jewels W5″. This ability is much more specific and relevant than Jake's. Now as it happens Lynzi is out of town, casing the train route they plan to rob — but even though, as another player character has a more appropriate ability, Lloyd has a -6 to Jake's ability.

This is a really neat metagaming aspect. Firstly, it makes every character have an incentive to have specific, appropriate skills — not just "Sword 18″ but "Swing from Chandelier and Flash My Rapier 18″. One of my issues with Runequest when it first came out, rather a long time ago, was that while cults and previous experience made characters different, they were far less defined than in D&D with its classes: Fighter, Mage, Cleric, Thief, etc. With this system every character has a strong motive to be designed as unique, with its own defined role and not stealing glory from the others. The Humakti is the deadly swordslinger walking down the street to a duel at high noon: the Storm Bull is a frothing berserker, launching himself against the horde of chaos creatures. They have a similar function as combat characters, but their players make sure they are differentiated, and have very different abilities. I really like this feature, and it has worked well in play.

Rising Stakes

If you read the above carefully you will notice that I said the base difficulty was for that session. Yes, every two sessions the base difficulty goes up, and a High difficulty task is always base +6, Very High base +9, Nearly Impossible base +W2. Likewise the base resistance to augments also goes up. Why? Well in my experience after a long HQ1 campaign, characters became VERY powerful. In HQ2 this is downplayed by this mechanic – odd, but works. You improve your character at the end of a session by spending some of the Hero Points the GM awards you to buy new abilities, or improve existing ones. However Hero Points can also be used to boost a contest result. In one of my games the players approached their clan asking for support, but had recently got the clan in to trouble with their tribal king, by an insulting limerick offered as a gift poem. While the clan do not like King Blackmoor, this could have nasty repercussions. Then the players rolled a fumble, I rolled a critical. A complete defeat. Not only were they not going to get any support, they were in real danger of being exiled given what they had done. Luckily Erenessa had a few spare Hero Points, and she spent one to boost her success from Fumble to Fail, and one more to boost it from Fail to Success. It was still a minor defeat, but it prevented the clan taking serious action against them: they all suffered -6 to their relationship with the clan as a minor penalty until the King was appeased, and they received absolutely no help and some new onerous duties. :(Without the expenditure of Hero Points it would have been much worse though.

After this experience the players were careful to keep a few Hero Points back, and not improve their characters every session. By session 7 most of them had a best ability, often a Keyword (more expensive to raise) at around 7W – the base resistance was by now 17 for a normal difficulty task. Erenessa above is unusual because her player spent most of his points boosting results. If you want to be good at something though, spend Hero Points to improve it. There is one rule which prevents characters having loads of low value ignored abilities – whenever you get one to 1W, 5 abilities at least 5 lower are increased by 3 points, in what is called a catch up. Players love this, and it appeals to their gamist tendencies!

So what's changed from HQ1?

Everything and nothing. If you don't know Heroquest 1.0, skip this bit! The game is still identifiably Heroquest, and everything I loved about the original is there. Yet also it's completely different – a change in approach comparable in the difference between D&D 3rd edition and D&D 4th edition, but in the opposite direction – from bean counting and tactical play, towards narrative storytelling.

Yet there are still a LOT of rules, they are still number heavy, but much simplified over HQ1.0, and augments which were a problem for me in Heroquest 1.0 have been totally reworked, and are now mainly about doing something new and interesting, not "add the +3 for sword skill, the +2 for Humakti, the +1 for hate Lunars, the +3 from my deathly glare and the +2 for my bunions of death, that's +11 every turn". One major change is augmenting is now usually with one ability, and you roll for it (or in some campaigns the GM can use the optional static augment – but then it's now a 5th of your skill.) The need to think up something new to do each time you augment to justify it really makes the game go way faster – before it was often a tedious exercise in scanning character sheets to wring the last possible augment (a bonus to an ability based on another ability) off your character sheet, now it's a much faster, cleaner system.

Extended contests and the consequences thereof have changed radically. Basically there are two types of Extended Contest — ones that take place during the main part of the story, which are less likely to mangle your character, and the final climax, where death or injury are far more likely. The HQ1 gambling for points bid is gone – replaced with a neat "first to 5 victory points mechanic. I was sceptical about this and planned to use HQ1 until I tried it, but actually collecting bottle tops or coins in an extended contest, and the way assists (where another character intervenes on your behalf) works really well in play. The examples given in the book, especially the long one of an Extended Group Contest are off putting, but actually using the system showed just how well it all worked in practice, and players have to narrate their actions and be creative, replacing the tedious "roll for attack, roll for parry, roll damage, subtract armour etc" of so many games.

In my opinion in an rpg combat you have three choices – let it be a die rolling contest, allow huge numbers of weapon and tactical choices to make for interesting combat, or to do what this game does and make storytelling the combat (and effective tactical choices therein) an essential element, making combat more than just an exercise in die rolling. D&D 4th ed increased participation via one a day, one a combat etc feats – the HQ2 rules have a similar effect in game play, with players trying t inventively find ways to augment, but now having to come up with something fresh every round, and often defaulting to "I just hit it!" if they are doing well. The requirement to come up with a fresh and exciting augment each round is just too much effort for a player who wants to win and get on with the next story: probably a sign I should not have used an extended contest.

On Extended Contests — almost everything in my sessions has been handled by simple contests, with one or in a few cases two extended contests per session when they really matter. They certainly have not all been combats — many have been debates, seductions, climbing a cliff, or even in one occasion making a new batch of extra-potent moonshine.

So long as it is critical to the narrative, interesting, and complex enough that you want to dwell on that bit of a story, you use an extended contest — if it is really really simple, you use a simple contest. When Frodo trekked across the marshes for days, in one of my least favourite sequences of Lord of the Rings, that would be a simple contest (if any). Trying to eject from an out of control jet fighter – that's probably an extended contest, even though it lasts less than a second of actual time.

If you wanted you could of course still use Heroquest 1.0′s mechanic easily enough. There is loads of good advice on running contests, examples throughout, and modifiers now give a +3, +6, or +9. There are no fiddly +1 or -2 type modifiers, every modifier if worth putting in is boldly drawn. And the old weapons and armour pluses are gone too – characters are assumed to just have them as part of their abilities, and creating your own abilities is as before a big part of the game, but in non-Gloranthan settings even bigger than before. There are rules for creating communities, including for designing clan history style background questionnaires to let players have input through their choices in to designing the communities past (like the one in Barbarian Adventures)- but now you can create your own for any setting. The community chapter also includes resource management rules, with variable scales, and where player character actions are important over and above random rolls.

The Pass/Fail Cycle

Every so often I read an idea that makes me rethink the way I think about roleplaying games. This was one of those occasions. In most rpg's the characters face certain resistances, defined by the setting. Dragons are terrible, mighty foes, Klingon ships are dangerous adversaries, goblins are spiteful but puny, the Nazi's vicious but dumb, the system you are trying to hack homicidally loaded with dangerous software to prevent an easy success. These numbers are dictated by the rules, the referees world vision, or even how experienced the characters are – "don't go in to the third level of the dungeon unless you are third level!" None of this applies here.

Here, the difficulty of an encounter varies by its place in the story, and how well the characters are doing. If they are constantly failing, the challenges get easier and easier till they succeed. If they keep succeeding, they builder up in difficulty throughout the session, and either way always culminate in a dangerous a nail-biting climax!

That's right, the difficulty of the challenges vary with how the characters are doing. A typical story will include both many successes and a few failures, which the characters will have to find ways round. When I first read this I was truly appalled – it seemed like the referee was just making the game up as they went along, and there was no way to be clever and "win" through good tactics – all story, but less game.

And then I saw - the Narrator (referee) can retrospectively create challenges based upon the next difficulty level, and is encouraged to change the difficulties to maintain genre and game world conventions – it does not matter how many times the characters failed climbing up the Lonely Mountain, if they poke Smaug on the nose with a stick they are in BIG trouble, and probably toast. Yet the Pass/Fail cycle really does seem to offer an exciting way to pace your narratives – letting the players succeed in defeating a minor obstacle before encountering Smaug may restore fun when the whole story seems to be falling apart through little more than bad dice rolls.

And if you hate it, well you can run Heroquest the "standard" rpg way, assigning all difficulties long in advance.

Now my playtest experience: I was really enthused an excited by this, and I printed off a Pass/Fail cycle sheet, and for my first two games I used it constantly, setting difficulties slavishly to it. And to be honest, it probably detracted from my game. Heresy! Robin Laws the author who I much admire has explored the role of the Pass/Fail cycle in his book Hamlet's Hit Points — perhaps it's my M.A. in Cultural Studies, but I really did not get enthused by it. If you love that book you will adore this aspect of HQ2 – but I finally for my third game did what Robin always intended, and set resistances as my storytelling instinct suggests, rather than worrying about the Pass/Fail cycle. I use it now as it was intended -as a guide – but most of the time i just set the difficulty of any given challenge based on my simulationist instinct, and you know what — my HQ2 games are much better for it.

It's a shame that this element that excited me so much was not all I hoped for – but as I say, I'm a simulationist at heart. My players always get in to interesting trouble, of their own making, and I am happy to use static resistances. In the Colymar Campaign in Sartar Kingdom of Heroes many challenges have set resistances,and you can modify them of course as your story requires, and I find that liberating. It's what GM's have done for years. A run of good or bad luck is not dictated by arbitrary changes in difficulty anyway — I rolled 5 criticals against my players in my last session, and let the dice stand, so the story was pretty dramatic, but of the resistance was 6 or 19 the result would have been the same anyway.

So is the Pass/Fail cycle a good idea? Yes; just follow the advice in the book, and don't follow it slavishly. I like to write down a few skills and numbers for some npc's — and my sense of story dictates the pacing, contests, and difficulty levels more than following the cycle now.

In Conclusion

If you have read my earlier reviews you will know I loved Heroquest 1, and really enjoyed it, and was wildly excited by HQ2 when it first came out. My players however are always more alert to problems than me, and the multiple augment thing did become an issue, as did high power levels over a year or so of weekly play. Both these faults are addressed in HQ2, and while I worried about the loss of Keywords with specific listed abilities, my players took to it. I did not really get the Rune magic system till I bought Sartar: Kingdom of Heroes – for HQ in Glorantha see my rave review of that. The book has faults, and there are aspects of the rules that I still struggle with — I find gun battles are at times a bit hard to describe, but I used a lot of simple contests for most, and it worked fine. So long as you get the way contest work, and carefully read the advice, it's a brilliant system. and while my players and I came to not dwell much on the Pass/Fail cycle, other groups will adore it. I was not keen on Hamlet's Hit Points — if you liked that book, this is the system for you. The main rule book has loads of examples, but nothing in the way of scenarios, and having played The Colymar Campaign from Sartar: Kingdom of Heroes a while that was amazingly handy in showing how to run the game, so that was a missed opportunity. (There are scenarios on the web, and any old HQ1 scenario, or indeed almost any rpg scenario at all, would be easily converted I think. However while i could run Traveller or Ars Magica scenarios with HQ2, I probably would not want to, as I could run them with those systems they were written for…)

This is a superb rpg, and I am still excited by it, love it, and really enjoy talking about it, as you can probably tell. It joins Ars Magica and Call of Cthulhu as one of the very very best rpgs I have ever run, and I have run a lot of rpgs over 30+ years. It is bit of a struggle to master, but once you finally get it, it is a beautiful game. Highly recommended.

SARTAR: KINGDOM OF HEROES

by Chris Jensen Romer

It's been a while since I wrote about my hobby, roleplaying games, and what follows is a brief review of a supplement for one such game, Heroquest 2. It's a pen and paper/tabletop rpg like Dungeons and Dragons, not a computer game, though there is a computer game and iphone app set in the same background, the excellent King of Dragon Pass, and if you have an iphone or can find the original game I highly recommend it. (I have only played the pc version, but they are pretty much the same I'm told.) Anyway if you follow my blog primarily for my writings on psychical research, and have no interest in games, you might want to skip this post! If however you have ever played a traditional rpg, or are interested in trying such things, have a look at my review of Heroquest 2 and drop me a line if you would like to know more. If you have ever played Runequest or Dragon Pass, then do read on!

Sartar Kingdom of Heroes is a book I waited a very long time to get, mainly because when I had the money I could not find it in the shops, and most of the time I never had the money! While Heroquest 2 is a generic system, where you can play any genre or setting at all, from Fantasy to Romance to Horror to Hospital Drama, or whatever else you and your players can come up with, it does have a short appendix on playing in Greg Stafford's fictional setting Glorantha, a beautifully detailed world of high myth and high adventure. My first two HQ2 games did not utilize these rules at all — I ran a heist movie game, which showed how fun and inspiring the character generation system was, and then ran a short Bonnie & Clyde inspired Depression era game about a family of moonshiners and bank robbers, which was also a lot of fun.

When I finally managed to get Sartar Kingdom of Heroes, I was tempted in to running my first Gloranthan game with the rules, and it has taught me an awful lot more about the strengths of the system. HQ2 is a great system – but with S:KoH it really sings, and purrs along. I asked my players to comment, and Rob Smith a veteran of twenty years rpg and dozens of systems wrote about HQ2… "Love the system. Really flexible on character generation and storytelling. Gave me the ability to try something really challenging and leftfield which was certainly immersive, escapist, liberating and highly enjoyable. I'll stop now before this ends up is "Pseud's Corner" in Private Eye."

The fact that since playing in Sartar three out of four of my players have decided to acquire Heroquest 2, and the other one I believe already owns the pdf tells you a lot. :) Much of what I write below is designed for people who already know Glorantha, but if you don't the computer game Skyrim's setting is very similar in some ways to this marvelous fantasy game setting.

So without further ado, the book…

Sartar Kingdom of Heroes – henceforth SKoH — is a physically impressive book. While most of my rpg books have a page count of 120-200 pages, this one weighs in at 378 pages – it has the look of a telephone directory, if you can remember such things before they went online and almost everyone went ex-directory. It's a paperback book, but with nice binding and it has so far survived the trauma of extensive use in game and being moved during redecoration, and is still in good condition. Physically I must say the presentation is excellent, though for a book of this size and which I will use as much as I will this one I would have bought a hardback if it was available. Moon Designs earlier paperback books however have long outlasted my Mongoose Runequest hardbacks, which have real binding issues, so I'm delighted with the book and have no worries about it falling apart.

So what is in the Book?

Everything apart from the Heroquest 2 rules you will need to run a Gloranthan rpg game set in Sartar, a kingdom of Dragon Pass. And I really mean that. While the Sartar Companion, which I also own and will review later is absolutely excellent, this book has an incredible amount in it. If you had never played any game set in the world of Glorantha before, then I think this book would make the ideal introduction. The book is divided up in to four sections.

Section 1 – Making Your Orlanthi Character

If you are a veteran RuneQuest or Heroquest player, and especially if you have read Storm Tribe and Thunder Rebels, most of this material will be familiar to you. What it does is explains beautifully how all this works with HQ2, and it is much, much clearer than the HQ2 appendix on Gloranthan magic. We did not have to refer to the rules once, simply using the list method (previously we had used narrative in earlier non-Gloranthan games, but the players did not know Glorantha well enough to attempt this), and the players choice of Runes defined their likely cults, personalities, and pretty much everything about their characters. The runes are absolutely central in HQ2, in a way they never were, ironically, in any edition of Runequest. Reading the HQ2 rules had made me doubt if it would work well – in play it worked beautifully. Now I was a big fan of HQ1, and HQ2 has fixed many problems my players found in that system — like multiple augments leading to long tedious number crunching contests — but the way runes work now is one of the highlights of the new edition, and while fundamentally similar, it really rewards player creativity. Selecting your runes first makes you think not in terms of "creating a Humakti", but in terms of creating a personality and then fitting that person to their cult. I really enjoyed running the flashback t the Women's initiation, which was central to two of the characters back story, but I would have liked a little more on the female initiation rites, but it worked really well when we just went with the story and I improvised and asked the players questions about their mystical understanding of what was happening.

One thing I will definitely recommend is the useful 13 page Player's Primer background for the Colymar Campaign (see later) which you can download free from Moon Designs site. It will give you a real feel for the book too. I asked my players to read this before we started the game, and then made sure they had read their cult description (see below) and they were away. Huge parts of SKoH can be safely be read by the players btw – the only parts I would ask them not to read are the Colymar Campaign, a series of adventures that comprise section 4 of the book, as that would spoil the fun of playing those adventures, which I have been running.

If you happen to have owned Barbarian Adventures, an early HQ1 book, or played King of Dragon Pass the PC and iphone game you will recognize the clan questionnaire which also appears in this section. As in many of Greg's games, community and relationships with clan, tribe and family are central to your characters; they are not rootless individuals out to kill stuff and take its gold, but rounded individuals who exist in a social milieu. As such you create a unique history for your clan, by answering questions about what your ancestors did in many key events in Gloranthan history and myth, and your clan and characters are shaped by this. My players familiarity with the incredibly rich and detailed (some would say overwhelming) Glorantha background varied, and they at times were really just answering by whatever seemed fun, but they learned a bit of Gloranthan myth and history in the process, and if they were interested in something I took the time to explain it a little – Nysalor, the First Age, the EWF, etc. We used the online clan generation sheet, and had fun creating our unique clan abilities and myths — Resist Sunspear, and the Secret of Dancing On Ice are the two I can recall now!

While this section is very newbie friendly indeed, it is perfectly readable even if you are a Gloranthan player of decades, and the introduction has a number of subtle in jokes aimed at old hands ranging from the Dragon Pass board game on that had me laughing out loud. This is something that recurs throughout the book – if you played Apple Lane, know who Rurik Runespear was or that is ransom was 300 guilders, or have ever sworn by Bladger your axe, you will love this book!)

Section 2 – Orlanthi Religion

I was tempted to skim this 120 page guide to Orlanthi religion, but I'm glad I did not. There is some great HQ2 material on how the rules and magic work in Glorantha, how different Feats can be acquired, how to sacrifice for one use specific magic, etc, etc. Even cults i thought I knew inside out like Ernalda and Orlanth had some surprises – I never thought of Ernalda as Arachne Solara till I read and understood part of this! — and their are many lovely insights even to people like me who grew up playing Runequest in the late 1970′s. Somehow the prose is fresh enough to avoid the "Kyger Litor again!" syndrome many old hands will know. ;) Not that Kyger Litor is detailed in the book – but Orlanth, Ernalda, Elmal, Urox the Storm Bull, Chalana Arroy, Lhankor Mhy, Issaries, Humakt and Yinkin (for those who have not kept up since Cults of Prax, the Sartarite God of alynxes, the big cats who take the role of dogs in Sartarite society) are. Like much of this book all this was a huge nostalgia trip to me, but still exciting and fresh. I wanted to call Axel and Eric Quigley, the chaps who introduced me to Glorantha, and beg them to buy the book. (The Sartar Companion has an even more nostalgic elements- an adventure called Return to Apple Lane, rather bitter sweet. As a demo adventure it is available from Moon Designs free here, but if you weren't there in the early 80′s you may never understand why I like it so much.) :) The chapter also contains a good section on Heroquesting, as is only appropriate for the game!

Section 3 – The Orlanthi Book

Once again, all is familiar, yet much new. Sections on Sartarite law and culture draw from the legacy of Thunder Rebels, and I think it fair to say that you don't need that or any earlier Gloranthan book but the HQ2 core rules to use this to full effect. Sections explain ducks, mostali, aldryami, the Lunars, the Red Goddess, Dara Happans and much else besides. This is a brilliantly written concise primer to what you will need to know to have fun in the setting. Some of it is deep history and background, mainly of use to people on the World of Glorantha mailing list, or those with a strong interest in the shaping of Sartar. It seems well researched, and completely compatible with the earlier book King of Sartar, which is a "faction" paperback that details the beginnings of the Hero Wars with several amusing nods to academic Biblical Criticism and academic studies of mythology. Fun as that book is, this section is much clearer and easier to comprehend, not being written as a Gloranthan document in the main, though one part is a Lunar report on the Orlanthi.

Section 4 – The Colymar Campaign

An admission – at the time of writing this review we have only just completed the first part of the three main "acts" of this epic adventure, which tells the story of the wooing of an Earth Priestess, and her courtship by one of the player characters. While the hook is a classic case of deux ex machina, one of the characters has to fall in love with her, from then on the storyline as written has been very useful, but not remotely constraining on our creativity, and we have had immense fun, perhaps the most fun I have had running any rpg in years, and I have recently run the superb Dara Happa

Stirs campaign for Runequest. I'm not going to say much about this, for fear of giving spoilers, but it is epic stuff and if you love Gloranatha it would be a terrible shame not to read it, and I can't imagine many groups who would not have fun trying to complete an almost impossible set of tasks to win the fair priestesses hand in marriage!

Appendix –

This stuff is important, as it describes the Calendar that is used extensively early in the book, and its placement here is a shame. It is worth if you are not familiar with the Gloranthan year reading this first, and also having a quick look at the useful descriptions of the 28 key Orlanthi holy days. The list of languages of Dragon Pass also answers obvious questions; remember also that nearly all Orlanthi are illiterate, so unless an initiate of Lhankor Mhy or you take literacy with some explanation as an ability, you can't read anything. :)

Overall

Now as you may have gathered, the book is pricey. I bought direct from Moon Designs </a for $59.99, rather than going to Leisure Games site or Cubicle 7 where it costs £40. However if you buy direct from Moon Designs, who always have the book in stock unlike UK retailers, they benefit from your sale and are more likely to produce even more great books in the future, and as the shops never seem to have it in stock, I went this route. :) I nearly cried at the cost because I'm let's face it far from wealthy– but when I saw the book, I realized it was worth every penny, and very reasonably priced for something this big and glossy to my mind at least, given how many times larger it is than most of my rpg books, and how incredibly useful it is.

The artwork is largely taken from previous publications of the last 40 years set in Glorantha, with some new pieces, and I like most of it, while one of my players was more critical. Nostalgia wins me over i think. The cover by Simon Bray is to my mind excellent, but my players were not so keen, but it is actually a very useful cover, and a page of the book explains all the things represented thereupon. I really like it though.
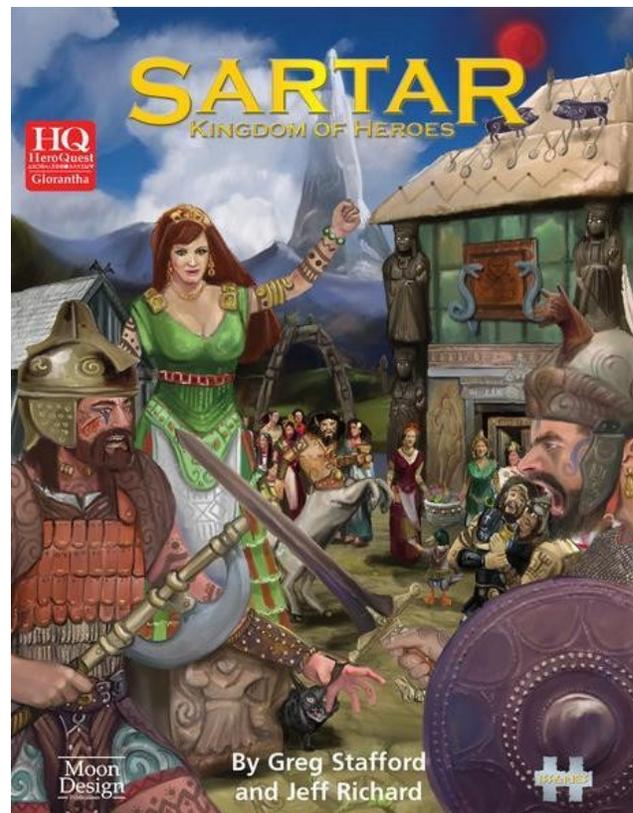
Overall, if you are fond of Glorantha, incredibly detailed rpg settings, or want to try Heroquest2 out, I can not recommend this book highly enough. A first rate piece of work, I report with pleasure the Sartar Companion is just as good. Do buy this book!

THE BELL, AND WHERE CHARACTER COMES FROM

by Morgan Davie

This weekend "Hydra", Wellington's first LARP convention, was held. I went out to play in one game, The Bell (The Bell is available for sale at Drivethru at http://rpg.drivethrustuff.com/product_info.php?products_id=99065) This is not a review, not least because I only saw one sliver of the whole.

(There are no substantive spoilers here. I keep things very vague. This account shouldn't affect your enjoyment of playing The Bell should the opportunity arise.)

The Bell uses a device that is widely seen in larp and RPG one-offs - amnesiac characters who slowly recover their memories. This is sometimes called a cliche, but I prefer to think of it as archetypal. (Or as the gaming equivalent of a jazz standard. Every jazz singer has their version of "Summertime", right?) Amnesiacs-recover-memories is a narrative form that is perfectly suited to done-in-one roleplay, because it unifies player and character knowledge and has a built in arc of development. The Bell uses it well.

Here's my war story

It seemed like every character had a choice to make. Mine was this: help someone to oppose the immoral business of my family, or shut them down to eliminate the risk they present to our wealth and status.

In the first section of play, however, I didn't know any of that. Even by the standards of amnesiac games, my character was nearly a blank slate at the beginning, with only a few personal issues noted and zero broader context. Events in this period proved crucial, as the person who opposed my family happened to have been the kindest, most engaging person I interacted with in that first section while I was ignorant.

As a result, when it became apparent they were at the centre of the choice before me, I was strongly disposed to help them - it just felt like the right thing to do, and the consequences and risks of turning against my family seemed distant or unreal.

As the game progressed, more detail emerged for me, but still there were only a few points of "hard data". Much of the content was evocative and suggestive rather than definitive. Because character information was limited, my play of the character relied on personal creative interpretation to a greater extent than usual in this kind of game.

As the game approached its final third I started to make my stake in opposing my family more obvious, asking to take my help to the next level. The other person was reluctant. As time ticked down I put more and more pressure on them to share their knowledge and bring me into their plans against my family. As this pressure became more forceful, it perhaps hardened their resolve. Ultimately, I was refused.

As we entered the conclusion and debrief, I abruptly knew exactly why I'd put so much pressure on the other person. I

knew that the end of the situation depicted in the game would mark a change in my character. I knew that my character, in normal circumstances, was weak; was subjugated by the family; would serve their interests loyally. My eager support for the opposing character was urgent because this was the only chance either of us had. So I established in the debriefing that my character would become an implacable enemy of the person I had begged to ally with. That final twist has stuck with me. I think this is because of how strongly felt it was, and how little it felt like my choice.

And yet, the strongly envisioned character that emerged through play was not imposed on me. There was nothing in the game material that determined how I related to my family; quite the opposite, this relationship was clearly up in the air and open to interpretation. There was nothing that forced me into a time limit. There was very little in the game material at all that framed this decision as I describe it above. But it didn't seem like that. It felt inevitable, and tragic (in the classical sense of a character's fatal flaw leading to disaster). I felt trapped. Saddened, even, by my failure to escape this circumstance.

That divergence fascinates me. How could I feel victimised by something that must have come from my own head? It felt like a glimpse of where character comes from.

Where do characters come from?

In a typical one-off game, players will be assigned characters to play. They will be given some kind of dossier on the character, that indicates things like their personality, their role, their relationships with others, their goals. Dossiers can be extensive or slender, and can be handed out in advance or (in the case of most amnesia games) piece-by-piece. The job of the player is to play a character that is not just consistent with this information, but has this information as their central defining nature. This is the first side of the character triangle: facts.

Facts of course can never be sufficient to fully encapsulate a character. People are simply too complex. This means that a player's projection into the role must go far beyond the facts. Inevitably the character is an expression of the player's views and intuitions and interests. This is the second side of the character triangle: self.

No game can ever hope to fully explore all sides of a character. The specific situation met by the character will force some aspects of character to be brought to light or challenged, while leaving other aspects unexamined. As the game progresses, people encountered and changing circumstances will give time to some aspects and leave others. This is the third side of the character triangle: situation.

My experience of The Bell was unusual in that so much space was given to the second side of the triangle, self. I was conscious of having to bring my own interests and personality into what I was doing, to "fill in the gaps". The fixed points, or constraints, provided to me in the form of character information did not seem to provide much help in shaping my moment-to-moment play. They meant I was attentive for anything happening around me that seemed related, and once or twice there were occasions when someone else would make a comment that was relevant, so my response was related. Mostly I took a few general principles from the character description and made everything else up.

Character detail steadily increased as memories returned. As previously noted, I didn't receive much in the way of hard data about the character in each new packet. However a curious trick took place - because I had been taking actions and having interactions right from the start, I had accumulated an extra set of data about my character, namely what I had

done. My early (mostly instinctual) choices about the character became strong elements informing the next "phase" of greater knowledge.

This big-picture structure of prior actions constraining future actions can be seen in the specific situation of that final choice. Why was I putting so much pressure on the other character as the end of the game approached? Partly because of the in-game situation, where I felt that other character genuinely would benefit from my involvement right then. But that's far from the whole picture. Partly also because of that old larp instinct to get everything out in the open by the end of the game, to bring every secret to light. Partly because it gave me something to chase after hard in an environment where goals were not dictated by the situation. Partly because playing a bit of conflict is a fun thing to enact.

But once this action had been taken it asserted its own logic on my character. That pressure was driven by something - some hidden urgency, greater than was obvious, not even understood by the character himself. Hence the snap of realisation: that the character as I had played it was not going to win; that outside of this room, outside of this situation, outside of the time when me-as-player was in this character, they would weaken, and they would submit.

Stories manipulate us

Chekhov's gun. When it appears at the start we wait for it to be fired. As a writer would see it: I want to fire a gun later, so I'll put it on the wall now. (Or I want the reader to think I'll fire a gun later, so I'll put one on the wall now.) That works if you write to a plan. But the truth is, no writer ever plans everything, and sometimes guns just appear. (I was just thinking, what would be in this dude's room? Yeah, a gun, that feels right for the character. This other character would definitely notice that gun, too, so it's a nice bit of character detail that shows how they're different. Great stuff.)

Except it doesn't stop there. Now that gun is on the wall, and the characters made a note of it and everything - it eats at you. You keep working and writing and that gun keeps popping up again. Even as a writer you're waiting for it to be fired. This is how stories bully us. We've internalised their principles - in this case, dramatic parsinomy, the idea that everything in the story is part of the structure of the story. And when we ignore the principles, or try to subvert them, they don't give in easily. They push us around. That's how I ended up feeling trapped by something I created myself. I had put a bunch of guns on the wall early on, and by the end I realised they were all pointed at me.

That's where characters come from - they come from play itself, in-game activity from moment to moment. Characters come from what they do. Facts, self and situation are three sides of a triangle, and the triangle they form is action.

 And that, perhaps, is why this play incident has turned over and over in my head - because it isn't just about larp. We construct character through action, in games like this, in writing fiction, in acting, and other overt creative pursuits. But this also applies to our own real-world "character", our identity, our nature. Informed by facts and situation, and some kind of "self" that we perhaps barely sense, we construct ourselves through the actions we take. Playing a character who is not yourself is escapism, of course. But it is also, fundamentally, an act of empathy. It is the process of identity, opened up so we can comprehend it in a new way.

It matters.

PEDAGOGY OF PLAY

by Sean Nittner

Willem over at The College of Mythic Cartography and my own podcast on icebreakers led to a discussion about teach people through games, specifically teaching people games through games. Breaking down all the components of a game into easy to digest and fun to learn steps.

I applied this to a Mouse Guard game that I ran at the Endgame Minicon: Into the Wild – Spring 1152. Here are the exercises:

1. Mouse Ball (based on the game sound ball, info from creative advantage)

Mouse guard is set in a medieval setting that constantly challenges mice for survival. The Guard has established a territory that they keep safe, but toil day in and day out to do so. Human civilization is not present, but the war with the Weasel overlord just ended and many other natural enemies threaten every mouse every day. What is life as a mouse in the territories like? What kind of threats must the Guard protect against? What challenges must you face? A game that young mice play when they are trying to scare each other. Name something scary then pass the mouse ball to another mouse.

Game

We start a round with one person saying a word that they think threatens the mice and then pass that word to another player. The player repeats the word and then says another word that it makes them think of and send it to another player. There are no wrong answers, but we stop when one player stalls.

We start a new round with the person that hesitated and continue for three to five minutes, focusing on the daily life of a mouse.

Between rounds ask if people are stockpiling answers or judging words. Encourage them to let the words inspire them to the next word instead. There are no wrong Mouse words.

Concepts

  * Build On the Ideas of Others;

  * Say the Next Obvious Thing;

  * Embrace Failure;

* Don't Self-Censor;

* Pay Attention to the Present;

* Be in the Moment;

* Don't Think Ahead;

* Make Your Partner Look Good;

* Play to Team-Win.

Goals

* Wake up the players

* Establish a mood of the game

* Spark ideas for conflicts

* Establish how HUGE the world is to a mouse

* Participate myself and get in the mood as well.

From Mouse Guard, Fall

2. Epic Journey

(Take from Justin's "epic journey" in Narrative Control – Episode 29, starting at 8:17)

Establish the mindset of a guard "Send any mouse to the job and it may or may not be done. Ask the Guard to do the task; even death cannot prevent it from completion". Thankless heroes who exist outside society, the Wild West Gunslinger, the Samurai, the Ranger of Middle Earth.

I explain that this has a real "in game" effect that a mouse of the guard never fails to achieve his goals, he just faces complications around the way.

Game

Three (of four) players take the role of veteran guards who will be the mentors of the characters they play. The fourth, picks a tenderpaw (green recruit) who will be played a veteran in the upcoming game. The veterans pick cards from a stack of weather, wilderness, animals or mice and describe a thematic element involving their card and give a name. Next player tells the shortest possible story incorporating the thematic elements and the names provided.

At this point we begin engaging the mechanics, with a simple test that has no modifiers. If they succeed, they play their thematic element card and present another challenge for the next mentor, If they fail, their current challenge is complicated by another event and the next mentor steps in to help, this time we introduce the helping dice.

The game caps with the Apprentice, who takes on one final challenge and either wins (by hitting the roll) or more likely looses (as their die pool is small and by this time the obstacle rather high) and succeeds in their task but suffers condition.

Concepts

   * Reading flags from other players;

   * Incorporating everyone's ideas;

   * Only holding the spotlight for the shortest possible time;

   * Adding one die mechanic complexity at a time.

 Goals

   * Create a picture in the players heads of the guards

   * Create the names of the patrol (NPC mentors or PC appretices).

   * Spark ideas for character concepts (apprentices)

   * Establish the structure of GMs Turn and Player's turn.

   * Teach the simple dice mechanics and the most common options ("I am wise", Helping, traits, and vs. tests)

3. Group Conflict

(Taken from Judd Karlman, Justin Evans, Ken Hite and Ryan Macklin who have all used NPCs to both set up the adventure and teach players how to play).

Read the motto "It's not what you fight; it's what you fight for" and start the fight that the Epic Journey had been building up to. Fights are the easiest conflicts to explain because the weapons are on the conflict sheet and all the actions make intuitive sense (Attack, Defend, Feint and Manuver).

Game

The players scripted their goals and stepped through the conflict system, each character taking a turn at leading the action with support from the others. To expedite the conflict (they can be long as a training I wanted to keep it concise) I ask each player to narrate a bit of awesomeness that their mouse does, then I do the same for their opponents, and then cut both sides disposition in half, rounded down.

The reason for this is that:

* Conflicts can go long and I don't want to drag this one out,

* wanted to make sure the players were familiar with making concessions (which happens when you lose disposition)

* I want the "Defend" maneuver to be immediately useful (which is generally isn't when you are at full disposition).

The conflict was bitchen and the results really charted the game from then on. We got more practice using skills, wises, teamwork and traits. We also introduced conflicts, fate, persona and compromises.

Concepts

* Practice using skills, wises, teamwork and traits.

* Introduce conflict mechanics (disposition, conflict actions and comprimises)

* Introduce the in game artha currency (fate and persona)

* Reincorporate skills from Epic Journey

Goals

* System proficiency

* Reincorporating only holding the spot light briefly, embracing failure, and teamwork

* Creating some grudges (compromises) for the future apprentice PCs to avenge

* Get players excited to pick up where the NPCs left off.

4. "I see"

Collaborative Character creation (Taken from Mythic Cartography amd Justin Evans' aspect hand outs). I Hand out character templates: Patrol Leader, two patrol guards and a tenderpaw. Name, belief, instinct, goal, and traits are blank. Each player picks a name from the previous exercise and then we start giving them traits.

Game

There are 12 cards on the table, each with a trait. Going around the table each player says "I see…" and includes another character and a description that includes one of those traits. Then hand the trait to that player.

Concepts

* Accepting endowments from other players

* Giving each other the opportunity for awesomeness

* Review of trait system

Goals

    * A collaboratively created cast of mice.

    * PC-PC relationships established.

    * Trait mechanics mastery

5. The accomplishment

(Taken from Dogs in the Vineyard)

Each mouse has a final trial before being made part of the guard. We play through a solo challenge to see how they have changed and form a Belief and Instinct.

Game

Based on the traits assigned (and who assigned them) each player asks a question about their mouse. "Am I brave enough to face the enemy?" "Do I think with my heart or my head?" and then Frames a flashback scene to find the answer. We roll a single test and from that pick a belief and instinct.

Concepts

    * Understand the dice mechanics

    * Make use of traits, persona and wises

    * Discuss how the mouse is changed by the outcome

    * Introduce advancement mechanics (you need both successes and failures to advance)

Goals

    * Create a belief

    * Create an instinct.

    * Mark a test (pass or fail)

6. GM's Turn

Meet Gwendolyn. Receive orders. One character receives the order. All players create goals and roll out!

INDIE ACTUAL PLAY REPORTS

by Sean Nittner, Lev Lafayette, and Michael Cole

Don't Rest Your Head – Don't Push Your Luck Actual Play Report (Sean Nittner)

GM: Carl Rigney

Players: Karen Twelves, Duane O' Brian, Chris Bennett, Sean Nittner

System: Don't Rest Your Head

Hack: Don't Push Your Luck

Carl wrote this hack of DRYH to emulate the setting from the movie Push. I haven't seen the movie but I got the gist of it from his description. People with powers + Evil organizations trying to control those powers = Thriller!

Note. There are apparently a lot of movies called Push. I mean this Push. Not Push, Push, or Push. Not even of these other NINETEEN MOVIES named Push!

The premise was good and the game was fun, but there were several things that did not work for me, some of them my fault, some of them the setting/situation/system, some of them the player dynamics.

To introduce the troubles I'm going to start with the cast, so there is some frame of reference:

Cast

Karen – Eva Jorgenson – A pusher who was saving up for her retirement fund. I couldn't tell if she was a "one last job" or and "anything for a buck" kind of mercenary. Not being to answer that question, even by the end of the game, was troubling for me.

Chris – A changer who was running from her past. Despite her ability to mimic other people, there were people hunting her, which constantly drove her to more and more desperate attempts to be free of them.

Duane – A combat field medic. I forget what the power is called but he could heal people. His character was an adrenaline junkie disillusioned with the "Man", in this his and my employer Division.

Sean – Allen (last name unknown) – A Wiper (memory eraser) who had wholes in his own memory that he didn't know where they came from. Did Division do this, or did he do it to himself. He was driven to find out. On the surface he was a reliable "Company Man" but secretly he was working a deal with Eva to steal Division secrets and sell them to a rival Power Organization (Harmonious Jade Society I think).

My beef with the situation

As per the normal convention of DRYH, each of our characters was asked "what just happened?" That is a starting point for the character that is supposed to build momentum. It's a "Kicker" from Sorcerer.

I've got two problems with this question. One, it has very little in the way of lead in. It doesn't tie to the other questions necessarily, it just asks us "what something exciting, dangerous, etc that just happened" but I find myself struggling with it, trying to figure out how far I should narrate, how much I should write down and how much I should leave to find out what happens in play. I also feel that the question can be very disjointed from the other things that matter to the character.

Eva's answer for instance was that a deal just went wrong and she was in the hot seat. Very cool, very bond, but very much not about her character's motivations. I mean, Carl and Karen are both pros, so they wove it into something but that deal going south really didn't have lasting consequences in the game, other than to create a threat. The deal itself didn't even really matter. I think we did some revisionist history later to say that deal was related to something else that came up, but it still didn't seem significant and more importantly it didn't really drive the character. She knew she didn't want to stay in that room, but otherwise the situation didn't giver her direction.

My second problem with the question is that it inherently sets up one plotline per character. In a long term game I think that would be cool, but in a four hour con slot, I think that leads towards several solo games that are largely unimportant to the players not involved. It takes active effort of the players and the GM to bring those stories together and I often feel like it's a real suspension of disbelief.

In this case Bennett was really off on his own. Though our characters intersected we couldn't find a way to keep them together. Bennett has done this before though in a game. In Scott White's Iron Road, he totally had his own story that didn't effect the rest of us. So many that was just Bennett being a lone ranger. Maybe it was the story not giving him opportunities. I did talk to him afterwards and he wanted to have our stories intersect but didn't know how to do it.

The setting has a baddie to draw players together: Division. Questions like this would serve the game better: How did you call come to be in Divisions cross-hairs? Or why is division interested in you? Or why did Division put you together with these people? Hmm… none of those create the kind of urgency that "What just happened?" does but I think something along those lines would be better for a con game.

My beef with the system/setting/hack

My power pissed me off. For reference I was a wiper. First off it seemed in all ways inferior to pushers. Pushers could make people remember things differently, or not remember them at all, so my ability to make people forget was totally superfluous to that. Also the effect of pushers was ostensibly permanent, while my memory wiping wore off.

That last one was the real pisser for me. I haven't seen the movie, but it just makes no sense to me that I would ever erase someone's memory. What good would it do? They would just remember in a couple hours or days. I mean sure, it could get me out of a bind or help in court case, but it seemed useless long term. Like at the end of the game when I switched sides they wanted to see me make an act of loyalty by wiping another Division agent. What the hell would be the point of that? He'd just remember in a few days. To make my power fun for me I decided to pretend that it was permanent. We were playing a four hour session that took place over one day, so for all intents and purposes the power

lasted all game, but it still grated on me that I couldn't believe in my own character.

Mechanics wise, Carl was mirroring DRYH but parts of the reskin didn't do it for me:

Good Example: Madness. When the madness equivalent dominated (I think it was Powers or Supernatural, can't remember) we had options of "Hurt ourself" or "Hurt others" (instead of Fight or Flight). That was a concrete choice we made and informed the narrative directly. I really liked it.

Bad Example: Exhaustion. When Pushing dominated (the Exhaustion dominated) we were supposed to narrate the situation getting more tense, more out of control. But sadly that felt nearly identical to when pain dominated. Ambiguity in things like "take the narrative in this direction" kills me.

My beef with the character interaction

As mentioned above, Bennett ended up in a different story from us. That sucked.

Eva and Allen had some deal going. She betrayed him, stole his stuff and then went to the airport and flew away. He didn't even realize she betrayed him and it never came up in the game. That was some serious lose ends there where there should have been tension and drama but wasn't. I was way frustrated with a particular roll when I spend all my mojo to try and keep her in a scene so that drama could unfold, failed the roll and ended up never knowing the better (as a result of her Push).

My character and Wayne's had this never quite developed relationship. I felt like I was cock blocking him all game. Like whenever he would learn something about me I didn't like, I would erase (or try to erase) it from him. That made me the lame lone ranger. My bad. I think our characters could have had something, but instead I pushed him to the outside of the story. LAME.

My beef with the story

Division didn't scare me. It should have but it didn't. In a setting where it's supposed to be a huge threat, I should have felt it and I didn't.

I got poisoned and nothing happened. I knew I was poisoned, even played it up (I started narrating myself walking woozy) but that was it. Maybe that's a mechanics thing. How do you represent someone being poisoned. I guess by throwing more pain dice at them. Ah, I would have liked that to do something.

My beef with me

For this supposedly conflicted character who might or might not have been erasing my own memories. I never, EVER,

erased my own memories. We talked about it, how it would be a blissful reprieve, but I never did it. And there was a perfect time when I SHOULD have: Right after the first scene, when I was caught trying to steel files from Division, I got shot (in fact Carl asked if I wanted to get shot and because I really wanted to see Duane's power in effect I said "yeah, I want that to happen") and then after Duane healed me I tried to make him forget it happened. What would have been WAY cooler is if I had erased my own memories just before meeting up with him so that when he said "How did you get shot?" I could have legitimately said "I have no idea." That would have been much more fun.

Also, I cock blocked Duane. Bad form. Bad Sean.

Thoughts on the game.

I had fun. I like the players. I like Carl's games, but this one had some things I wasn't hot on. See above.

Psi*Run – Days of Future Past Actual Play Report (Sean Nittner)

GM: Carl Rigney

Players: Sean Nittner, Karen Twelves, Eric K Lytle

System: Psi*Run

Setting: Days of Future Past (X-men)

This is what I know. Psi*Run is a game about amnesiac psychics on the run. This is what we played: amnesiac mutants on the run. Yep, I'm down with this hack.

The hack is based on the 1980s X-men storyline of the same name. From Wikipedia:

"Days of Future Past" is a popular storyline in the Marvel Comics comic book The Uncanny X-Men issues #141 and #142, published in 1981. It deals with a dystopian alternative future in which mutants are incarcerated in internment camps. An older Kitty Pryde transfers her mind into the younger, present-day Kitty Pryde, who brings the X-Men to prevent a fatal moment in history which triggers anti-mutant hysteria.

We were each given a Mutant ID sheet (character sheet) and filled in these questions:

I don't know who I am! But when I look in the mirror, I see: An "M" is carved into my face and…

What powers do you want? Be vague. Keep a very loose idea of who you are. It make change. Other players may get to help define who you are.

So we started answering those questions. I went for a young black man with electrokenisis. I wanted lightning powers and the ability to "talk" to machines via electricity. Karen was a young woman who had been badly beaten up (still covered in bruises) and could steal powers. Eric had crazy 80′s x-men green hair and the power to duplicate himself.

This power became incredibly… complicated. More on that later.

Carl explained some of the game, the dice and scene mechanics an we stated playing. The first thing I noticed was that to do something we were rolling dice, rolling dice created all kinds of narrative outcomes (being caught, getting hurt, powers going wild), which led to situations that we needed to do something, which meant rolling dice.

We did a lot of narrating coolness, and a lot of dice rolling, but not much player interaction or role-playing. Part of this was due to the frantic chase mechanics in the game. Unless the highest dice are allocated avoiding the chase, the chasers (in this case Sentinels) would catch us. Further, most of our actions were dangerous, so we were getting beat up all over the place. The general experience was quite rushed. And I'm sure that's intentional, but it did mean it took us a while to actually start "playing" our characters.

The story we told was one of four mutants with a plan to take down the Sentinels. They had been caught, their memories erased and sent off to Xavier knows where to keep them out of trouble. One of the mutants that sent them away was actually the same mutant, thanks to his own duplicating power… and speaking of which, lets talk duplicates.

It turns out the "Roach" (I got to name him with one of my questions) could make as many of himself as he wanted, but each duplicate was fully sentient, self-aware and self-interested. This meant that his copies weren't always very helpful. There was a major question of "am the original or just another copy" which we answered, but by the very end, the question seemed moot, as eventually the original and the copy became indistinguishable. As an interesting twist, when a copy died, all of it's memories came back to the creator…unless the creator was dead. Then, well, the math started getting strange.

At one point in the game there were an army of Roaches fighting, predictably, an army of Roaches!

Karen's character has the ability to steal powers, which I wonder if that was frustrating as we only met two other mutants besides us. In the span of the game she did get everyone's powers, but I'm still not sure if that was enough. Though her having the duplication power, and being terrified to use it, was pretty hilarious.

Eric gladly took the role of the traitor, but sadly by the end I even got confused on who he was double crossing, two many different Roaches with too many different loyalties.

For my part I enjoyed playing "Lightning Bug" learning he was the son of one of the scientists that designed the Sentinels, and then was put in an internment camp when it was revealed he was a mutant. But when his powers manifested he understood their programming, and could use it against them. Unbeknownst to me, I ended up programming Sentinels to do the exact same thing that happened in the comics, which was fly into the sun!

Thoughts on the game

As I mentioned, the space for "play" seemed very narrow. We were constantly running. I'm sure that is part of the design goals, but I think there needs to be a built in function to make some space for the characters to grow and interact. I'd suggest a flashback mechanic, but as they are all amnesiacs, that wouldn't work. I'd say using a confessional, but what I really want is relationship building, plus a confessional makes it seem like the event is being staged, so that's no good. Still thinking on this.

Good times as usual with Carl. He was very dedicated to running the game exactly as directed by the rules, a critical component when play testing a game.

The scenario is a good one, it reminds of Lady Blackbird. You've just broken free, your on the run and once you've had two seconds to catch your breath you find out it is worse than you could have possibly imagined.

Hollow Earth Expedition - The Search for the Soul of the Earth Actual Play Report (Sean Nittner)

GM: Todd Furler

Players: Alan Hodges, Gil Treviso, Kevin Beagle, Aaron Beagle, Sean Nittner, Larry Lynch-Freshner, Thomas Fraser

System: Hollow Earth Expedition
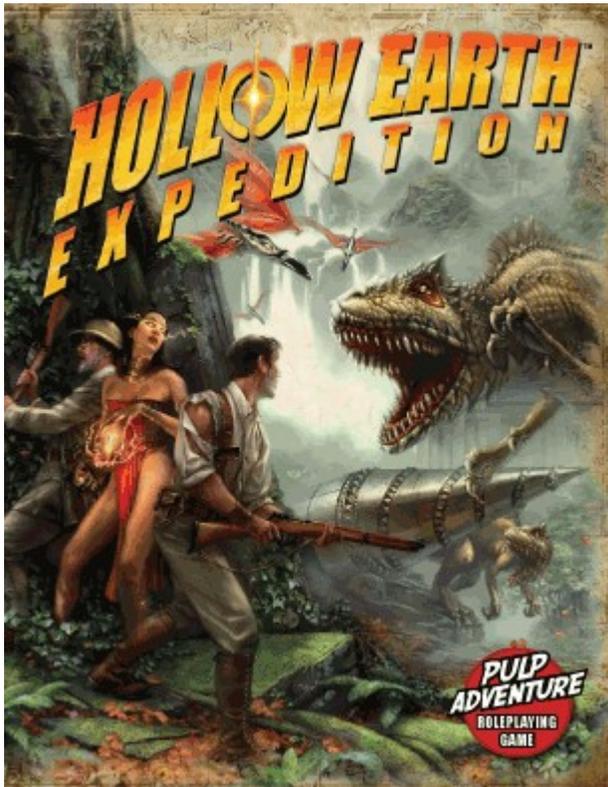
Todd is a fantastic GM, and this was a fantastic group of players. As first official game at DundraCon, I couldn't have asked for more.

Because this is a game Todd will run again at KublaCon (and I'm working on shipping him out to Big Bad Con as well) I won't give away any plot elements of the game. Play in it and find out for yourself. You'll love it.

The Furler Method

I feel like Todd's approach to GMing should be captured, analyzed, documented and then disseminated for other GMs to learn from. His approach is very different than mine, and very different than other GMs I admire (see the "Rigney's Rules") but that doesn't make them anything less than awesome. So, while I don't have perfect memory, I have played in half a dozen of Todd's games, so I'm going to try and cobble together my collective memories of the games and start on a prototype document of the "The Furler Method". Todd, if you read this, and

have the time, please add in anything I missed, and/or correct any errors I've made.

The Setup

When you arrive at one of Todd's games you see a character tent in front of every seat. He always assures you not to worry, sit down anywhere you like, as where you sit doesn't affect what character you play. The character tents are card stock letter size pages folded in half. On both sides there is a picture of the character, their name and traits appropriate to the game. In Hollow Earth, it was a quote from the character or a short descriptor. In Unknown Armies it is four short statements about the first impression the characters give off in their four status (body, mind, soul and speed). The characters photos are rarely (if ever) celebrities so there is no association with other movies, shows, music, etc, but they are generally very evocative of what kind of person that character is (or at least appears to be on the surface).

There is also candy on the table. Jolly Ranchers specifically. Along with note pads, pencils and dice appropriate to the game.

Todd has a GM screen up, though I'm not sure why. I've never seen him make a roll in a game, though I have seen him refer to notes on occasion. The fact that he uses a screen is often easy to miss because he spends most (if not all) of the game standing up. So it is still very easy to engage with him.

The Pitch

Todd starts every game greeting the players, getting their full names (which he records), and introduce himself. He confirms that we're all here to do the same thing (play in his game) and gives some cautionary information (where water is, where the fire exits are, when we'll take breaks, how long the game will last, etc).

He then introduces his gaming style, which is modeled after a movie, and includes all the (desirable) tropes of filing a movie. Specifically his goal, for running a successful game is that at the end of it everyone at the table will push back away from the table and say "I'd pay money to see that movie in a theatre".

Depending on the genre of the game, he states goals for the movie we're all shooting together. For instance, in Hollow Earth expedition he requires that we all had a bias towards action and that we leave the audience constantly on the edge of their seats worrying about the safety of our characters. In the Unknown Armies game (a horror game) he required that we all work towards making a serious horror film.

Todd is both the producer and director of the movie. He will open and close scenes, he will give the players assignments (like "we need to see your character show off his amazing aviation skills here"), and he will determine what makes the cut and what doesn't. As he said it he pays for the movie reel by the inch, and he's not paying for fluff, tangents, or references to other movies.

The players are the actors. They are given an assignment of a situation, and told to describe how that looks to the

camera. He often tells you "don't tell me what you do, tell me what the camera sees." When that authority is passed to the players they are granted quite a bit of license to place just about anything else in the shot. They control their character, but also (so long as it is not completely objectionable to the other players) all the other characters, the set, the props, much of the action, and all the camera effects. The players are encouraged, even required to say what's going on, what kind of music should be playing, and how the audience should feel about the action taking place.

A small and quirky example for me was that our movie was taking place in 1941 and we weren't certain at first if it should be in black and white or color. We decided it would start in black and white and then shift to color at a certain point in the film. As I was playing a robber baron character who was impossibly rich and wealthy, I stated that when the film changed to color my character was in a charcoal suit, had salt and pepper hair and grey eyes. The rest of the movie was being filmed in color, except me, I wouldn't have any of that nonsense. My character remained in black and white.

The far more common case was that we narrated the amazing dangers our characters faced and then the last moment desperate gamble they would take to barely dodge a fatal encounter.

Finally Todd encourages players to use all the collective knowledge at the table to frame the most interesting scene possible. He specifically encourages meta-gaming if it would make the movie more enjoyable. The example he gives is that if Player A's character knows something, Player B should feel totally at liberty ask Player A if he or she can let it slip so that Player B's character can overhear, should it make the story more exciting or interesting for them to know.

Our characters

After the pitch was made Todd will tell all the players about the characters as well as a bit of background about the game. He's very conscious to leave out specific details. We know about the game, probably less than you would about a moving having seen the trailer, but perhaps as much as you would get from a teaser.

Players choose characters in the order that they arrived at the table and generally speaking the last two or three are asked to negotiate who gets which character so that nobody is stuck with only one choice.

Once all the character tents have been selected, Todd hands out character sheets which have one page of our character "stats" and one page (or more) of our background and relationships with other players.

This is the one area where Todd's sensibilities and mine are divergent. While Todd never takes players aside at the table, the character sheets often contain secrets. Sometimes they aren't secrets because anyone is trying to hide them, sometimes they are just things other people don't know. But there are also some big whoppers in there too. And this is where we have a philosophical divide. While Todd encourages players to reveal their secrets in game (else what is the point of having them) I find that two things happen:

a) The players sometimes don't. In our game for instance Larry was playing a character that did something none of us understood and it was never explained why. I don't know in Larry's case the motivation for keeping the secret. In fact, I should have stuck around the game later on to talk to him about it. Regardless, six out of the eight people at that table

(including Todd) had no idea what was going on with his character and thus we couldn't play off it.

b) If the players don't know about characters secrets they can't build suspense around them. So, let's say the player knows that his character's best friend is actually having an affair with his fiancée (not in this game, just an example). That player can spend the entire game pushing that envelope that he might find out. He can keep showing up early from work, creating either hilarious escapades (if it is that kind of movie) or terrifying near misses (if it is that kind of movie) and constantly keep building the tension. If they didn't know, all that happens is at the end they find out, but it's the same time the audience finds out, so there is no build up. And that's assuming we don't have the case above where the player with the secret never reveals!

Todd goes over the characters sheets bit by bit to explain both where to find things on your character sheet and how the game works. As he reviews skills, stats, etc, he also explains how the dice mechanics work, what currencies are in the game (e.g. style dice) and what kind of flags your characters have (e.g. obsessions and stimulus in Unknown Armies, motivation and flaws in Hollow Earth Expedition). This is the part where the gamey bits are explained, like what you would roll to leap off a crashing zeppelin and onto a passing fighter plane, for example!

The game is the thing

Once the players have been acquainted with Todd's expectations, the characters and the system, the game proper starts. Todd opens the first scene and then puts it to the players to introduce their characters to the audience.

I can't really go too far into game play specifics without revealing the story, so instead I'll point out some of the principles I see Todd exhibit in play of pulp action (defining these principles as such inspired by Apocalypse World):

* Promote the protagonists as imminently competent. Todd is always framing the success and failures of the PCs from the perspective that they should be able to do anything they set their minds to, it is only circumstance that prevents them from achieving their goals.

 * Cut to the important actions. Todd will often allow a lot of action to take place without any roll or dispute until it comes to the pivotal action that determines the protagonist's outcome. He doesn't want the player concerned with whether they can do all the prerequisite steps to make a cool thing happen, he just wants to find out of the final stroke is a home run or a foul ball.

* As for the action that he wants to see. As noted above, Todd will often tell players "This is where we need to see this specific thing from you" and coach them into bringing that to light.

* Rejoice in the success of the protagonists. Todd will shout, cheer, yell "yes!" when our protagonists succeed in something larger than life that improves the movie. He is a cheerleader of good play.

* Immediately clamp down on play that is not suited for the game. Diverging slightly from the pulp references, in our horror game, early on there was a case where to the players started a comedic exchange that was not fitting with a "serious horror film" and he immediately told them to stop it and reminded that they had agreed to make a serious horror film with him.

* Provide incredible leeway to the players to frame a conflict or action in the way that would best serve the story. Questions like "how many enemies are surrounding me" are generally met with answers like "how many does their need to be for the story? You tell me."

Todd always allows players and option to "cut" any scene. This is his approach to lines and veils. If anyone is uncomfortable with the content, they can cut a scene and then the table will collectively negotiate whether or not that scene can be finished with any necessary provisions to make the player comfortable or whether we just need to move to the next scene.

Wrap up

In the end Todd asks for the ending credits of the movie, allows for players to wrap up any small, unresolved bits, and then closes the game asking "was that a movie you would pay money to see?"

Thoughts on the game

I have never had so much fun playing a callous robber baron as I did this weekend. Edgar Richmond was a big picture guy with other people to handle the details. To that effect I ordered zoos and museums built in my name, gave my assistant impossible tasks and then told her not to bore me with the details when she asked how they would be accomplished, and generally assumed I could get anything I wanted with the judicious use of money and haggling. Alan Hodges played my incredibly competent but totally deferential assistant Stacy and together our dialog and antics had me cracking up through most of the game. That relationship was absolutely hilarious.

While nothing Todd presented was really a huge shock, it was totally unexpected and an absolute blast to play through.

The player quality at the table was just top notch. Everyone there was fantastic. At one point Gil's character (the geologist) told this totally ego boosting lie to me, that I fell for completely and it was the motivation for so much of my character's actions through the rest of the game. That was awesome!

Agon Actual Play Report (Lev Lafayette)

Agon is a delightfully competitive and cooperative RPG set in heroic age of Greece. Whilst GM takes an explicit Antagonist role, as indicated by their title, they are empowered to set the story in motion by a commanding Quest from the Gods, but are limited in what they can throw at the players by Strife. Player characters are also challenged from within the group itself. Whilst they must co-operate to achieve their goals, an objective of the game is to achieve the greatest Glory for the chracter's God - and that occurs not only by being part of the winning team, but by being the best in the winning team. Player characters both cooperate and compete at the same time.

Character generation starts with a name and a Heroic Trait, which provides a bonus in conflicts. The name provides an associated name die but also a Fate value. The lower the Fate the greater your potential story is, the higher your name die the greater the base chance of success. Mortals receive a d6 name die and 0 Fate. Demigods receive a d8 with a Fate of 8. In playtests, be unsurprised if players want to be demigods.

The next step is to rate 16 different abilities from d4 to d10, in the broad categories of Arete, Craft, Sport and Battle. Everything starts at a d6, and players have two free die increases to place where they wish. They may also decrease one Ability in a category to raise another Ability in a category. Players then choose a patron god for their character. This god has a list of three Abilities which may come into play when the character wishes to make a Sacrifice to the god. Finally, players choose weapons and armor for their character. A character may have a bow or javelins, three picks among shield, spear, and sword, and helmet, breastplate, and greaves.

Character creation concludes with Achievements. At this stage each player takes turns picking another player's character to challenge. The Antagonist describes a scene from the heroes' past and the two roll. The victor receives an Oath from the loser and the scene is narrated such that the victor aided the loser in that situation and so the loser owes them a debt of gratitude. Oaths can be called upon for assistance, healing, or tactical support in a battle. These are resolved by the simple contest method; just roll the name plus ability and narrate the story based on the result. One character in the playtest did very well extracting oaths from all the other players! Such is the luck of the dice.

The complex method, or a battle, is any detailed conflict (a fight, a lecture, a poetry contest). Battle uses an abstract "Range Strip" to handle a lot of the tactics; a series of rows. Depending on the environment (cramped interior, rugged exterior at night, etc.) the protagonists and antagonists start at different ranges from one another. Characters arm themselves with dice in their left hand (defense) and right hand (offense). Dice are gained from the weapon used, by the relevant Ability, and from a character's Name. Then all participants make a Position roll (Name + Athletics) and act in order from lowest roll to highest. On the character's action they may move any unit one range increment. If the hero is hit they will take a Wound based on the degree the attack beat their defense. The Wound Track, which has six levels, pushes injuries down the line. When a hero is wearing armor they may roll an armor die to try and negate the hit.

The sample scenario used was the Beast of Kolkoris, an supposedly simple quest of find a beast and kill it. Of course, it is a little more complex than this, involving storms, an apparent dead-end of a investigation, a labyrinth, a combat and a moral challenge. In an unexpected twist, at least to the scenario designer, the PCs took an angle where they satisfied the letter but not the spirit of the quest, doubtless like Odysseus, more than happy to trick the Gods with human reason.

Agon is a great short, independent game, extremely well designed and with excellent capacity for longer-term development. The only complaint that can possibly be levelled at it is the lack of elaboration for the more complex "battle" resolution for activities other than physical conflict. That would indeed be a challenge, and one that could fit quite well within the Hellenic genre.

In A Wicked Age Actual Play Report (Lev Lafayette)

The game begins by consulting the Oracle; this sets a general setting for the game that will be played. The options are "Blood and Sex", "God-Kings of War", "The Unquiet Past" or "A Nest Of Vipers". I gave a thin smile when a player blurted out "Blood and sex!". From the Oracle entry one choose a four cards, which add characters, events, and background etc which will be incorporated into play. For example, 3 of Diamonds "A raving prophet, advocating self-mortification and deprivation of appetites". There is a random generator for those who don't have cards (http://www.lumpley.com/oracle/4oracles.php) and a very, very cool collection of fan-developed material for other materials (http://www.random-generator.com/index.php?title=In_a_Wicked_Age), which display how adaptable this story system is.

Once the Oracle is consulted, each player chooses a character from the list to play. Characters can and almost invariably will be combined from the Oracle's words. If nobody takes up a role (indeed, nobody wanted to be the self-mortifying prophet), the GM is presented with the golden opportunity to make this a very major NPC. Once characters are chosen, they are given "Forms" and a Paricular Strength. The Forms are Covertly, Directly, For Myself, For Others, With Love and With Violence, with each assigned a die from d4, d6, d6, d8, d10 and d12. "Particular Strengths" are any ability that gives an advantage (e.g., Youthful Beauty, Magistrate, Arcane Magic were selections from our game). NPCs are given three forms; Action, Maneuvering and Self-Protection, which a d12/d8, d10/d6 and d6/d4 values are assigned, along with an optional Particular Strength. Both PCs and NPCs have a couple of "Best Interests". These are the story-telling drives to the character's activities and should be designed to conflict with other characters; this is a beautiful moment.

Each scene is set by the GM which involves conflicts in the character's Best Interests. These remain as story-telling until one character makes an action another character opposes when two Forms are rolled which reflect their action, or one for NPCs, plus Particular Strengths if relevant. The highest single die outcome is compared to the other single highest die results. The person with the highest roll gains Advantage in the form of an extra d6 that adds to their highest result on the next roll. Conflicts last for three rounds or until one player's highest die roll (plus Advantage die) is double that of the other player's die. The players then determine Consequences (Exhaust or Injure, lose die values or Negotiate, plead for alternatives), which default to reducing the die sizes of a character's Forms. In actual play we found that the bonus d6 makes an enormous difference; the initial victory makes it very difficult for the other characters to turn the tables. However, a character which survives at least one round makes it into the "We Owe" list, which determines that the character can be reinvoked in the future.

Whilst we were not overly enamoured by the conflict resolution system, the brilliance of the game appears in what is a superb combination of character generation, setting, and plot elements, and subsequently the motivation for the GM to include these conflicts within scenes. Indeed, with a little bit of development it should be more than possible to use this system for other game systems.

Best Friends Actual Play Report (Michael Cole)

Best Friends is an independent game created by Gregor Hutton, which involves the players each playing a girl, who is "best friends" with the other player characters "…and try to do stuff together while secretly hating each other. And getting little frissons of excitement out of getting one up on your best friends."

To this extent, it is a very specific game, and thus will be limited in its appeal, but what it does, it does very well. It succeeds in conveying an environment of pettiness and backstabbing, as well as allowing the players to play out all the stereotypes as found in teen movies. This does mean that it will also have limited playability, and don't expect to run a huge campaign based on it, but it is great for pulling out for an occasional one-off session.
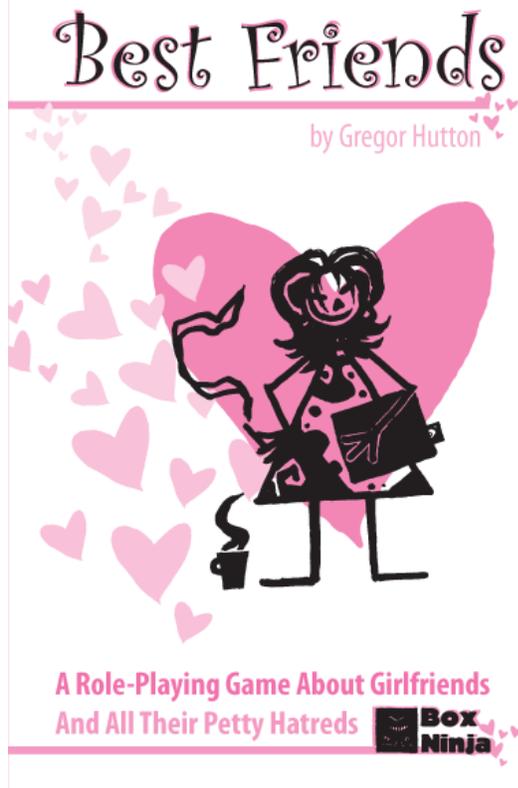
It is an antagonistic game, that requires players to actively conspire against each other, in that great back-stabbing tradition of being really nice to each other's faces, whilst secretly trying to destroy them. If this isn't what you are looking for, don't try this game.

The greatest strength about this game is its character generation system. Without going into too much detail, characters have five characteristics, Pretty, Cool, Smart, Tough and Rich, and these are decided by the other players. In a very cute touch, the players decide what they hate the other player's character for; for being tougher, or smarter, or richer etc than them. For each time you are hated by being better than someone else in a particular characteristic, that characteristic goes up by one. I would agree with the author here – this is different, and I haven't seen it before either.

The characters are then put in situations by the GM, through which they need to use their ratings to succeed. If the situation rating is more that the relevant characteristic, then unless they pay the penalty of a chip or token (to another player), they lose and take a penalty. The players are given only a limited number of tokens to start, and once gone, they cannot void penalties.

This makes the antagonistic nature clear – players should "nicely" engineer the situations presented to work to their best ratings and the other players weaker ratings. This is a skill in itself, and this will generally determine the winner.

The GM is required to create a plot-line that allows plenty of opportunities for the players to engage in this one-upmanship. For my session, I had an end-of-year dance. For the three "girls" playing, this provided: -

A choice of two potential dates – the "Jock" and the "Geek"

Choices of dresses with appearance ratings

Other aspects, including a stash of drugs, which could be used to either bribe a date, impede a rival, or ultimately to plant on a rival and then call the cops, thus having them busted.

It then mutated during play into having the father of one of the 'girls' being a big-time drug dealer, who was 'involved' with one of the potential boyfriends, which also allowed plenty of black-mail opportunity – remember, we are not talking happily ever after here, merely being the first to the post.

This does mean that the game requires a GM, and this does limit it compared against other "antagonistic" games. Someone needs to create the situations and feed them to the characters. With a little more thought, and the requirement of the players to put more into the session, it could be turned into a GM-less system, but for an indie game that was created in a 24-hour window (for the "Ronnie" award – see http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php), it is still very well done.

The greatest issue with this is, however, its granularity. Generally, stats will be mostly ones, with some zeroes or twos. The maximum you can have is equal to the number of players. Given the antagonistic nature, this makes the gameplay somewhat staid – you figure out what you are better at than another player, and then try to challenge them in that criteria. It can then turn into an almost round-robin session of trading chips. What it needs desperately is some element of randomisation, so that simply having a better score than another player is not a guarantee.

All it really needs is some sort of matrix such as like in war-games, with the Situation Rating along the top, the characteristic rating down the side, and then cross-referencing a number that needs to be rolled on a d6 to pass the test. It would just add that little extra dimension that would stop it becoming predictable.

All in all, this is an excellent little game that would easily be able to fill in a session, and that I would thoroughly recommend. Just make sure that you are willing to play a stereotype teenage girl, and don't take it too seriously.

TUNNELS & TROLLS BESTIARY PART I

by Karl David Brown

This is the second of a series of articles for 5th edition Tunnels & Trolls, the first appeared in RPG Review 12. Each will provide some house rules and/or a selection of monsters in alphabetical order.

More on Attributes

I use the following house rules and interpretations for monsters and PCs:

Speed (SP) is considered a prime attribute (T&T 2.36). In my house rules for tactical combat (to appear in a later issue if RPG Review) Speed also determines when you act in a combat round, higher acts first. Saving rolls that depend on reaction time (rather than say agility) are made against SP. Note: SP never improves with experience.

Dexterity is treated as manual dexterity only. This results in many non-humanoids having low or zero dexterity. Agility has been subsumed into Luck and reaction time is covered by Speed. Maximum Strength is initial STx2. Experience may never raise a character above this. This prevents very experienced humans from lifting 8' bronze statues and performing other over the top feats. Luck also covers agility, balance and perception as well as blind luck. To some extent you make your own luck. Archetypal rogues have high luck, as do cats. Note: dexterity is manual dexterity. In my world elves are perceptive, graceful, and blessed. LK must be at least 14 for a character to be an elf.

Using Monsters

I adjust the T&T rules for monsters in the following manner:

MR rated monsters' adds are not reduced when they are wounded. When calculating adds from the MR round up. MR only monsters can use weapons if they have hands but do not get dice from MR if they do. They do get the adds from MR when using a weapon. Healing unlike the standard rule monsters heal at the same rate as characters.

Making Monsters

I use the level one monsters from the T&T rulebook as a guide but I prefer to assign my own MRs based on my concept of the monster in question. In general the MRs given in the main rules are quite tough (T&T 3.6). So many of my monsters are lower than the official versions, on the other hand I happen to know more about the capabilities of animals than many referee's. Most people underestimate just how strong animals are so my beasts are quite tough. I also prefer to assign full attributes for most (T&T 2.4 and 3.6).

The monsters here are given as MR's, attributes for a typical specimen, and all the information needed to create a unique and fully detailed NPC. For wandering monsters and other unimportant sword-fodder just an MR, any armour and any special attacks or defences the creature is going to use need be noted down in your scenario. If an attribute for an MR monster is needed use the typical score given. For important NPCs and challenging encounters it is best to

create the monster as you would a PC and all the information you need to do this has been given.

This modular format for monsters makes the creation of new types of monster easy. For a hastily created monster for a quick encounter just an MR (and natural armour if any) can be given. Latter the MR can be converted to full attributes and given a description.

To convert MR to attributes the following procedure was used: CON=MR or if a split MR is given use the second 'constitutional' MR. The monster's personal adds are equal to half the (fighting) MR and ST, DX and LK can be assigned based on this and what is known about the monster (for example an ogre's adds will be due almost entirely to ST). Other attributes can be assigned using this guide: 1-2 very poor, 3-7 poor, 8-13 average, 14-25 good, 26-50 excellent, 50+ heroic. One of the good things about the T&T system is that the attributes are close to linear, a ST20 character can carry twice as much as a ST10 one. Determination of attributes is therefore easy. For example, if you know chimpanzees are 6x stronger than humans weight for weight then perhaps the human-sized chimpanzee people have x6 to ST. Monsters without hands, trunks, tentacles or other manipulators have a dexterity of zero. Finally, distribute the combat dice from the monster's MR to its various natural weapons. Note that any special abilities a monster has (such as a dragon's fiery breath) should never do more damage (dice plus adds) than that assigned from its MR. This last rule is in fairness to players, no gerbils that breath infernos, and to mesh with the gudelines for monsters as player characters (see below).

Example: My Orcs are rated MR25 so have 3d+13. CON is therefore 25. So we grant a typical orc ST21, DX 10 and LK 16 as we imagine orcs as brutish and ape-like so therefore stronger and more agile than humans but not greatly so. Orcs don't have any obvious natural weapons so we decide they have two clawed hands and a fanged bite each doing a miserly 1d. The other attributes are arbitrarily set at IQ 9, CHR-12, and SP10. Note that CHR is negative as is often the case with monsters.

To convert to a NPC/PC kindred divide these scores by 10 and round to nearest 1/2. So my orcs are CON x2½ , ST x2, DX x1, LK x1½ , IQ x1, CHR x-1, SP x1. Then go on to determine height, weight, and age rules (see T&T 3.6 for some ideas).

Healing unlike the standard rule monsters heal at the same rate as characters.

Split MRs: you can give monsters a fighting MR and a constitutional MR (T&T 2.41). I try to avoid this but sometimes it can't be helped. For an average human, if unarmed, has one dice and no adds so would be MR1 but the same person would have 10 CON so therefore MR10. I would note this as 1:10 (constitutional MR is always second).

Too many dice?: the number of dice some powerful monsters will be assigned can be unwieldy. For example my frost giants have 32 dice, you are unlikely to have 32 dice and if you do it'll take forever to add them up. To deal with this roll a smaller number of dice and multiply. For example for the frost giant you could roll 3dx10 +2d or 10dx3+2d or 8dx4. I would not recommend rolling 1dx30+2d because the more dice you roll the more likely the result will be close to the average. For this reason I would use at least three dice when applying this method. The astute among you will observe that even then none of these options is as likely to roll close to the average as 32d, this is true but here we must compromise the math to make the game playable.

Flying creatures can carry half their allowed weight or less and still fly.

PC Weres, Awakened Beasts, and Monsters.

Weres are humans able to shape shift into one form of normal animal. These are given as a PC kindred in T&T but with little guidance. Some advice is given here. Weres are all 'human' never other kin, Some non-human shape-shifters do exist, and use the same rules, these are much rarer and are only of one animal type and generally are not PCs. In human form weres look normal but may combine features within the human range reminiscent of their animal form. For example: a were-wolf may have a rangy build and have thick prematurely grey hair; a were-raven might have a light build, sleek black hair and a beaky nose; and a were lion a muscular athletic build, strong jaw-line, and a thick mane of dread-locks. A were's native tongue is usually common and most learn the low tongue of their beast shape as a skill (see T&T 3.4). However, some feral weres may have the low tongue of their beast shape as their native tongue.

I scanned through myths from around the world and found a number of shape shifter types. In western mythology we imagine were-wolves, bears, and boars most often but there are rarer shape shifters who take the forms of ravens, seals (selkies), swans (swan-may) in occidental myths. A Stone Age painting 'The Shaman' depicts a transforming were-stag. In the east there are also 'weres' including the hengeyokai who have many types including carp, cat, crane, dog, duck, fox, hares, monkey, rat, and sparrow. Looking south, on the 'Dark Continent' are evil were-hyenas, proud were-elephants, as well as noble were-lions and leopards. All these types are only those I found in a couple of hours; there are bound to be many more. In short, almost any kind of natural animal could be found as a were. I personally limit weres to vertebrates and place limits on the attribute multipliers allowed for player character weres (see below). See my bestiary for some suitable were-beasts.

As a guideline add up all the attribute modifiers (yes negative CHR subtracts) of the animal form (not the animal it is based on, IQ is x1) and if 13 or under the kin may be suitable for use as a player character. Intelligent animal forms (such as giant eagles as per Tolkien) may not be chosen by any were PC or NPC. Weres change only into pure animals never a half-beast form. They have no special vulnerability to silver, nor any special protection against regular weapons. In your world there might be evil monstrous versions of some weres that do have adverse reactions to silver and cannot be harmed by normal weapons, such creatures may not be PCs. The transformation is fairly swift but still counts as the character's initiated action for the round in combat. When transformed use the DEX, CHR, SP, LK, ST and CON of the animal form. In animal form weres also all the abilities and limitations of the form including natural weapons, armour, flight, swimming etc. Wolves are actually DEX x0, CHR x1 (though rural peasants may react as if x-1), SPx2, LKx3, STx2 and CON x3. In wolf form they can bite for 4d. While in were-form DX usually drops to zero. Some were types with manipulative paws may have higher DX.

Adjustments to attributes are calculated once at first level, increases to abilities from experience (or other means) are applied equally to both sets of scores. For example Wyldar Vulfgard is created with a human ST of 14 so his wolf form has ST 28 (double initial human ST). After delving into the Maw of Terror dungeon Wyldar amasses enough experience to reach second level looking at his options he decides to raise ST by 2. Wyldar's human ST becomes 16 and his wolf form is ST30 (not ST32, double 16). If one form's ST reaches maximum then experience can still be used to increase ST in the other form until it too reaches its maximum. After many adventures Wyldar's human ST reaches 28 the maximum allowed and his wolf ST is 42. When Wyldar reaches 6th level he decides to raise his ST again. In this case his human ST already at maximum remains at 28 and his wolf ST is raised to 48 and still has room for improvement (his maximum wolf ST is 2x28=56).

Were's choose the earliest maturing of their two halves to determine starting age and the longest lived to determine old age. Most therefore mature quickly then live live a human span but there are exceptions, were-tortoises being notable.

# indicates a creature suitable for use as a PC were-form. As a guideline add up all the attribute modifiers (yes negative CHR subtracts) of the animal form (not the animal it is based on, IQ of the animal form is x1). If the sum is under 13 the kin may be suitable for use as a player character. Intelligent animal forms (such as giant eagles as per Tolkien) may not be chosen by any were PC or NPC.

Awakened Beasts: This optional rule allows players to take the role of animals. On rare occasions either by accident or design magic awakens true intelligence in an animal. Circumstances where this could happen include: accidents in alchemist laboratories, fallout from terrible arcane artefacts, and deliberate experimentation by wizards. Awakened beast have severe limitations so as compensation the attributes of beasts are sometimes be higher overall than other kindreds when the character is first created, use the guidelines for choosing wereforms. Due to the following limitations it is recommended that only one or two delvers in a party are beasts. All awakened beasts have IQx1 rather than the value listed in my Bestiary. Beast DX is zero (or very low) limiting weapon and tool use. They will be treated like well, animals by most NPCs. They begin play with no equipment and since they are not regarded as citizens in most cultures (or as equals by most other delvers) are unlikely ever to own much. Their native language is a low tongue capable of expressing only simple ideas. They can learn other languages but not speak them unless they are of an animal species that can normally learn to pronounce words such as parrots and ravens. If the skill rules presented in RPG Review 12 are used, skill choices are limited to roles appropriate to the animal, for example 'guard dog' could be an acceptable skill for some but no animal is going to be a lawyer. Horses could be plough horses, riding horses or warhorses. Wild beasts can take a skill to represent their ability to survive, wild wolf for wolves, wild duck for ducks etc. Similarly, strays may take a skill representing scrounging and survival in the towns, e.g. stray cat etc. Those with a 'pet' skill (e.g. pet raven) know how to 'behave themselves' and get a familiarity bonus in some social situations such as when begging or endearing themselves to the people of the world.

also indicates creatures able to be used as awakened beast PCs. All awakened beasts have IQx1 rather than the value listed.

Monsters and other kindreds can sometimes be adapted to use as PCs. In my campaigns the kindreds above are common (in a pseudo-European setting) and usually 'good' (if weres are lumped together as a single kindred). Trolls will detailed in their own section of a future article because, though most are not good, in a game called Tunnels & Trolls one can assume trolls are somewhat common and deserve special attention in the rules. The world however is a big place full of all manner of creatures some of these other kindreds could be used as player characters especially in games set in non-European lands; for example in an 'African' setting elves and leprechauns would be very rare but theriocephs and awakened animals might be quite common. As guidelines add up all the attribute modifiers (yes negative CHR subtracts) and if under 8 the kin may be suitable for use as a player character (guidelines for more powerful creatures joining high level parties are given in my Bestiary). An average IQ of at least 5 is also recommended unless you want to play a beast (but see Awakened Beasts above). Animal intelligence also covers cunning but despite this is not rated over 5 and cannot be raised above 1 point higher than the listed average value ever.

Charisma and Role playing monsters: What makes a monster a monster and not just a person from another species and culture? In some cases a 'monster' is just that, this is particularly the case with 'good' monsters that have positive CHR. However, for most monsters there exists a gulf of understanding that will always prevent lasting peace with the good kindreds. These creatures are given 'negative' charisma. This is treated as per normal charisma except that it is more limited in its uses. Negative charisma can be used for intimidation, threats, leering and similar interactions but not leadership, rousing speeches, or appeals to compassion etc. This is because monsters just don't have the mental

instincts for trust and compassion. They simply can't grasp the emotions in this 'blind spot' anymore than a dwarf can fly. Monster societies are hierarchies built on fear and intimidation. Monsters don't trust their companions not to kill them in their sleep. A monster sleeps well when he believes his companions fear him too much to attack even if he seems asleep or when he enjoys the protection of a more powerful monster. This 'blind spot' means that a monster cannot trust and sees no reason why those who don't fear him wouldn't kill or rob him. This makes integration of monsters into a party difficult at best. The 'blind spot' also prevents monsters from cooperating as well as humans and other 'good' kin preventing monsters from becoming too much of a threat. However, sometimes a very powerful monster can build a huge army with a hierarchy intimidation keeping the rabble in line until the foundation of that chain of command (the powerful leader) is destroyed.

When PC monsters meet good kindred this difference in outlook typically leads to misunderstanding and violence. Monstrous kindreds have bad reputations and even well meaning monsters approaching 'good' settlement will typically be driven off or killed before they can try to demonstrate their peaceful intentions. A PC from a negative charisma kindred will need to avoid settlements of the good kin, enter them in disguise, or perhaps pose as a servant of a more acceptable companion. The larger the typical negative charisma of the kindred is the more extreme the reaction. These strong reactions are a balancing factor for many monster kindreds and should not be ignored.

When gaining levels characters can use option F two ways. Firstly, they can add to charisma. With this option characters with negative charisma can build good reputations and learn to mimic the social behaviour of the good kin until eventually their CHR will reach positive values. Alternatively, subtract as a character's selfish and merciless behaviour and sheer power spreads a reputation of fear thereby subtracting from charisma.

'*' Monsters are ones I might consider as PCs. As a guideline add up all the attribute modifiers (yes negative CHR subtracts) and if under 8 the kin may be suitable for use as a player character. An average IQ of at least 5 is also recommended unless you want to play a beast. Such characters generally abide by the guidelines above for role playing monsters. Only one is in this article but more will be presented in future issues.

A referee may allow more powerful monsters to join experienced parties. As guidelines the creature should be intelligent and be of equal or lower power than the rest of the party. The creatures personal adds + 3/dice for damage should not exceed the lowest personal adds among the parties more usual kin (one in the core rules or * here). If the creature's 'personal adds + 3/dice' is less than the lowest personal adds in the party it is joining the referee may allow the creature a few levels until it is on par but never as many levels as the lowest existing 'usual kin' member of the party. The creatures IQ, CON, CHA and SPD must not exceed the highest values found in the parties more usual members. Example a Brute 9 dice + 40 could join a party if the weakest usual kin member had at least 67 (9x3+40) personal adds provided the brute's IQ, CON, CHA and SPD do not exceed the highest values found in the parties more usual members. Once the creature has joined the party and begun adventuring and earning experience points these restrictions are no longer applied (i.e. they do not limit the creatures choices when advancing levels).

NATIONS OF THE INTELLECT

by Karl David Brown

I turned back, and perceived a vast opaque body between me and the sun moving forwards towards the island: it seemed to be about two miles high, and hid the sun six or seven minutes; but I did not observe the air to be much colder, or the sky more darkened, than if I had stood under the shade of a mountain. As it approached nearer over the place where I was, it appeared to be a firm substance, the bottom flat, smooth, and shining very bright, from the reflection of the sea below. I stood upon a height about two hundred yards from the shore, and saw this vast body descending almost to a parallel with me, at less than an English mile distance. I took out my pocket perspective, and could plainly discover numbers of people moving up and down the sides of it, which appeared to be sloping; but what those people where doing I was not able to distinguish. (Gulliver's Travels, Swift)

This article describes some of the lesser known nationalities of Gulliver's Travels, those of the flying island of Laputa and the lands below. It contains only descriptive text for these aspects intended for use with Gulliver's Trading Company and FATE 2e.

Gratuitous plug time!

This is an excerpt from the Gulliver's Trading Company game detailing some of the nationality aspects for FATE 2e. The beta edition of the Gulliver's Trading Company game is available for free at:

http://rpgreview.net/node/40

or a more up to date version on Scribd.

http://www.scribd.com/doc/84956575/Gullivers-Trading-Co-Grub

Nationalities are a kind of intrinsic aspect important to the 18th century. Where aspects describe nationalities they include personality traits as well as physical appearance and scale. Individual characters can down-play national traits by restraint in using the aspect for these purposes or by acquiring personal aspects, these always overpower national traits. For example the Balnibarbians are a driven people but a Blefuscian with the 'lazy' aspect lacks the desprate drive of her countrymen. Like all aspects nationalities can be invoked to produce equipment. Generally, nationality invocation will allow items common in, unique to, or associated with your nation. Most societies in the 18th century are armed therefore weapons and armour can be obtained in this manner. As always any items obtained should reflect the whole character, this is especially true of weaponry. A English gentleman could invoke his nationality to collect a smallsword before venturing forth; a common English sailor could not gain a smallsword this way but could obtain a knife or gaff hook.

An Important Note on Nationalities

The description of the various nationalities derived from the attitudes of the English in the 18th century further distorted by the lens of Gulliver's Travels 'written' by the fictional misanthrope Lemuel Gulliver. The belief in 'national character' was almost universal in Europe and an accepted part of academic discourse at this time. A character struggling against the prejudices inherent in the aspect descriptions is entirely valid. Such a character will earn Fate points whenever these prejudices become an obstacle. In addition, if to the tastes of your gaming group, the character can be a source of satire against 21st century racism. It should also be noted that Lemuel reports events without a much bias for Europeans. He recounts how a Japanese pirate treats him with greater mercy and politeness than a fellow European and Christian.

Balnibarbian

Balnibarbians live under the rule and influence of the flying island of Laputa. Balnibarbians are enthralled by the idea of improvement. Spurred on by the Royal Academy of Projectors in Lagado and similar institutes in the nation's other cities, Balnibarbians look forward to the day when improvements in agriculture, manufacture and society produce a utopia. In the mean time continual experimentation with imperfect methods and abandoning of traditional lore has made the nation unproductive and impoverished. Rather than becoming disillusioned by their plight the natives have become more determined. They believe their misery now is a noble sacrifice in the name of the paradise to come. Malnourished and impoverished they strive on driven by hope and despair.

Common Balnibarbians have a harried aire and a glint of wild desperation in their eyes as they rush from one strange task to another. For the most part they are dressed in ill-fitting rags.

A few older persons of quality and those under them resist the new projects to improve the nation and continue to build and cultivate according to the old lore (they have a 'Traditionalist' aspect). The estates of these men are oasis of fruitful agriculture and sturdy construction in a desolate country. Such people are ill regarded by patriots as enemies of innovation who prefer their own ease and comfort to the hard work and temporary suffering that must be endured for the greater good of Barlnibarbi.

The country of Balnibarbi properly includes Laputa, Lindalino, and Glubbdubdrib, however these territories are culturally distinct and therefore are assigned their own nationality aspects.

Names: Male Names: Munodi. Further names can be created by mixing syllables from Balnibarbian place names (Glubbdubdrib is not a Balnibarbese word). Since Balnibarbese is described as sounding similar to Italian ending names in 'i' or 'o' and generally giving them an Italian sound is appropriate. The few Balnibarbese words we know are three to four syllables, names should also be this length. Examples: Balpuno, Nitalini, Barblalino, Bipudani, Lalinbalo, Putdabarbo.

Players can invoke this aspect to: overcome hunger and exposure, gain advantage during academic debates, be well received by projectors, and enhance tests for science and music.

Referees can invoke this aspect to: reduce any roll for making any material good or any other practical task such as agriculture; have the character fooled by charlatans, act on curiosity when discretion would be a wiser course, become involved in a projector's flawed scheme; be ridiculed by foreigners for his ill-fitting and poorly made clothes.

Laputan Lord

Laputans speak the same language as those below in Balnibarbi. This aspect is only used by men of quality, the king and his court, servants who live on Laputa such as the flappers and tailors use the Balnibarbian aspect. Laputan women are too sensible to be represented by this aspect.

Laputan lords dress in ill-fitting garments adorned with images of heavenly bodies and musical instruments.

Laputan intellects are highly attuned to the sublime portions of the universe; they excel at advanced mathematics, abstract thought, musical theory, and astronomy. In this last many are so sensitive that if they concentrate they can discern the 'music of the spheres' created as celestial bodies move through the heavens (see Music of the Spheres p122).

The scholars of Laputa often ascend into intellectual reverie. At these times their heads tilt, one of their eyes turns inward as if in introspection and the other rolls to point to the heavens. These fugues can occur at any time even in the middle of conversations or emergencies preventing the Laputan from noticing events. At these times their wives can enact great familiarities with gallants from the lands below right in front them. The only actions a Laputan can take during a fugue are to listen to the music of the spheres, solve abstract problems, or compose music. To minimise the distraction created by these reveries Laputans should spend an aspect or extra on a flapper attendant. Those not in need of such an attendant are considered to be contemptable intellectual weaklings by the Laputan court.

The great mental abilities of the Laputans are highly focussed. They have poor short-term memories, no imagination, little curiosity, and no capacity for invention. Application of the abstract theories of Laputa to practical inventions required the lesser intellects of projectors who live below in Balnibarbi.

The Laputans are not constantly absorbed in mathematical reverie and do have a few less intellectual interests. Like many astronomers worldwide they are often keen on astrology but vehemently deny this interest. They also are fond of conversation on two topics, politics, and celestial dooms. In the first they eagerly debate political matters and strongly proclaim their opinions even though most have had neither political training nor talent. Though Laputa is the court of the land below and its citizens often argue over politics the flying island's inhabitants seem content to take no political action beyond ensuring that the taxes that sustain them continue to be sent up.

The second common topic of conversation in Laputa is the end of the world. They live in apprehension of several astronomical dooms causing them to discuss the state of the sun or approach of comets as often as other peoples discuss the weather. The sun is expected to become encrusted with the waste of its own burning preventing light and heat from reaching the Earth, failing that the sun will eventually consume all its fuel, and a comet's tail is due to collide with the Earth in 1757. These tales of impending doom are listened to eagerly, thrill them with fear, then latter disturb their

sleep.

Whatever their intellectual abilities, beyond the realm of the mind they are the most clumsy, awkward, and unhandy people that Lemuel Gulliver, an experience traveller, had ever seen.

Names: see Balnibarbian names

Players can invoke this aspect to: solve an abstract mathematical problem, compose Laputan style music, or make an astronomical observation.

Referees can invoke this aspect to: penalise attempts at handiwork or poise, to hinder any intrigue roll, have the character ridiculed by foreigners for his ill-fitting and oddly decorated clothes, to impede any observation roll, as a poor reasoner flail in a logical argument, or become rapt in reverie regardless of the action around him. This last can be countered by a flapper.

Laputan Lady

Though raised on the flying island of Laputa high born Ladies of Laputa are far more grounded and practical than their intellectual husbands but also capable of caprice. Laputan Ladies relish the common pleasures of life that their husbands find little interest in. While the Lords live in apprehension of dooms their wives are known for their vivacity. There is such difference between the genders that a separate aspect is given for each. The women have become contemptuous of their fathers and husbands. They are fond of the company of visitors from Balnibarbi below and feel no love for the flying island where they are virtually prisoners.

The eccentric fashions of the Lords of Laputa are not popular with the women. Servants and Ladies of Laputa often prefer garments taken from the lands below to Laputan fashion, though of late these are also ill-fitting. Therefore gowns produced by traditionalists are in great demand in Laputa.

Names: see Balnibarbian names.

Players can invoke this aspect to: use common sense, escape from Laputa, befriend or seduce a non-Laputan, conceal a secret from a Laputan lord.

Referees can invoke this aspect to: have servants prevent the character from leaving Laputa, endure a tedious Laputan court dinner when they need to be elsewhere, be accused of being an enemy of progress by Balnibarbians on account of your traditionalist gown.

INDEPENDENT GAME SYSTEMS AND INDUSTRY

by Lev Lafayette

Like independent press, music, or video games, the idea that there are defining characteristics that constitute "indie roleplaying games" is not simple. A typical argument is that independence implies that the organisation is not subject to funding from outside sources such as investment capital. Nevertheless, one must also recognise the potential of benefactor funding (as was once more common in the arts), which did not impede on independence. Another elaboration of this is that somehow an independent production is antithetical to commercial quality or commercial success, mass popularity, or even the capacity to achieve these successes. This is not unusual with the music industry, where there is not only a certain degree of hipness associated with not being a major label, a defining quality of the majors is having their own distribution channels. However it is certainly not necessarily the case in video game industry, with games such as Minecraft which satisfies all three criteria, and yet is most certainly 'independent'. The Independent RPG Game Awards classify independent as meaning (a) the author retains full copyright over the work and (b) at least 50% of the product is the author's material (to make up from outsourced artwork etc). The awards also note, "[a] fully independent game would be one where the same person or people did all steps of product, including art, layout, printing, and distribution."

Whilst one could get into subcategories such as semi-independent producers who are owned by a larger parent company (e.g., so-called "boutique" labels in music), it would seem that, the strongest definition that cuts across industries and medium is that the producer is either a individual or a cooperative venture of the producers themselves. This provides a particularly strong definition for the roleplaying games industry and there can be little doubt that in the sheer quantity of numbers (if not market share), the independent RPG producers make up an majority of publishers and have done so for a very long time. It is certainly worth noting that Dungeons & Dragons started as a product of an independent company ("Tactical Studies Rules"), founded by Gary Gygax and close friend Donald Kaye. Detractors who consider independent RPG publishing to some sort of vanity press are well reminded that Gygax made a number of attempts to get mainstream publishers to take up his new-fangled game and it was only after this rejection that Tactical Studies Rules was born. TSR stands an interesting example of a game company that started as an independent before becoming a mainstream one, a model that would be followed by others in the near future (e.g., Chaosium, Hero Games, Iron Crown Enterprises, Palladium Books). An interesting aside example was Scott Bizar's FGU, which actively sought designs from independent designers; Bizar himself was, and is not, a designer.

In terms of system design, nearly all independent games until the late 1990s could be classified as "heartbreakers", to use the evocative descriptor given by Ron Edwards. In the early days of the industry when the industry was still finding its place there was enormous debate over what was perceived as the twin poles of playability (e.g., Tunnels & Trolls) and realism (e.g., Chivalry & Sorcery), as readings of Alarums and Excursions clearly indicate - RuneQuest made a point of advertising itself as "playable realism" with more than some degree of success. However the wealth of material that came out during the period are mostly variations from the core model provided by Dungeons & Dragons. The caveat "mostly" is used advisedly here. Like more contemporary heartbreakers they also almost invariably included some gems of setting and system which indicated the imagination of the time - certainly "Realm of Yolmi" and "Wizard's Realm" both fall into this category. One particular game that was truly innovative at the time for including both a vastly different abstract turn-scale and social interactions was GDW's "En Garde!".

One major issue of independent roleplaying games in the period was competing with the three tier model of distribution; publisher to warehouse to game store. Dealing with such an environment requires not only a modicum of managerial skill but also, it must be said, sufficient capital clout to wave the stick at recalcitrant distributors along the

chain. Cash flow issues are far from unusual in small businesses and when one's business is very small, then the problem can almost be a death knell. Looking at the history of roleplaying games one cannot help but be slightly horrified at the number of great games that simply could not compete, not due to any particular design flaws, but because of distribution issues (e.g., "Alma Mater", "The Morrow Project", . Some particularly good games were fortunate enough to be taken up by larger publishing houses, such as Jeffrey Dillow's "High Fantasy", which was eventually published by Reston. One great survivor must be David Nalle's "Ysgarth", which from the first edition in 1979 to the seventh edition in 1998 has been published through Nalle's Ragnarok Press. One certainly cannot fault Nalle for his extraordinary commitment to his game system.

Much overlooked in usual consideration of independent designers is the vast quantity that was released under the d20/OGL period from 2000 to 2008. This is somewhat understandable. For many, independent producers of d20/OGL material aren't game designers in the strict sense, for they haven't actually designed a game system. However there can certainly be no doubt of their independence of many of them as publishers and the fact that they produced scenarios, rules supplements and elaborations, and sourcebooks. Previous issues of RPG Review (14) looked at the d20/OGL in some detail, so additional elaboration here is not really required. However it is worth mentioning that this can be broadly considered part of the "open gaming" approach which views licensing in a similar manner to free and open-source software, such as game systems like "Dominion Rules".

In more contemporary times however, the lay of the land for independent roleplaying games has changed substantially. There are two related major factors at play here; the Internet, and game design theory. From the former perspective the production and distribution model has changed qualitatively. Whether it is through generic publishing agents who specialise in print-on-demand (e.g., Lulu) or with PDF only products, the necessity of the designer to publisher to warehose to retail chain is broken, and, it must be added, increasingly so. Whilst there is still a market for the hardcopy produced and distributed in such a format this market will both centralise, due to increasing capital costs, and decline, with increasing improvements in the technology of the electronic format, both in terms of the referencing systems that are incorporated through hyperlinks (whether in HTML or PDF) and through the physical medium itself, with the increasing portability and speed of lightweight tablets and various e-reader products. As this hardware becomes easier and faster to use than physical books themselves, one can easily imagine a situation where the book becomes a collectible rather than a core product.

With regards to game design theory there is no need here to give a thorough exegesis of contemporary game design theory. It is more than sufficient to mention that analysis of creative agendas in players and game systems have lead to a significant increase in the popularity of "narrativist" roleplaying game, many of which are strongly associated with independent design. One only has to review the winning Independent Game Awards for the past several years for verification of this statement: 2010 Apocalypse World by D. Vincent Baker, 2009 Kagematsu, 2008 Mouse Guard by Luke Crane and David Petersen, 2007 Grey Ranks, by Jason Morningstar, 2006 Spirit of the Century, by Robert Donoghue, Fred Hicks, Leonard Balsera, 2005 Polaris, by Ben Lehman, 2004 Dogs in the Vineyard by D. Vincent Barker, 2003 My Life With Master by Paul Czege, and 2002 Dust Devils by Matt Snyder. The reason that this is related to the rise of the Internet is at least partially due to the popularity of increasingly sophisticated MMORPGs, from Ultima Online (1997), EverQuest (1999), RuneScape (2001), and, of course, World of Warcraft (2004). Deriving from MUDs in the 1980s and early 1990s, the MMORPG has replaced many of the detailed simulationist and gamist features of the "pencil and dice" roleplaying games of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. It is probably an unconscious act of strategic gap analysis that has led many independent game designers - from Hero Wars onwards - to adopt a flexible, rules-light systems, which are dominated by narrative descriptors and interpretation.

This does not mean that the future is sunshine and lollipops for the aspiring independent game designer and publisher. They will, in fact, suffer some very significant challenges which are again Internet-driven. The first is that the barriers

to entry are substantially lowered for independent game publishing and everyone and their dog can join the party. Whilst this is a beautiful example of part of the requirements for a free market under perfect competition, it equally reduces the consumer's market knowledge - which is a step away from the ideal market situation. At least 27 roleplaying systems were published in 2011, of which 24 were first editions. It takes a particular level of dedication to review all of them - it also doesn't help that two of them had the same name. The second challenge is an intersection point of technology, economics and law. In economics, there is an inevitable tendency of the price of a product to equal its marginal cost in an open market. It doesn't take rocket science to work out what that is when it comes to electronic products. Whilst so-called 'piracy' is much maligned among sellers, for obvious reasons, consumers are also wary of DRM-crippled products and are actually quite fond of a technology which allows them to download an out-of-print supplement from a publisher long out of business. We may note with some wisdom the decision of Wizards of the Coast in 2009 to pulled all digital downloads of their products from their online stores, and the effect (i.e., none) this had on preventing pirated pdf versions of their books.

It is tempting to think that the independent game designer and publisher is going to find themselves reduced to a hobby-level producer. Whilst there is a tendency in this direction it is not necessarily so. Most consumers, assuming sufficient disposable income of the few dollars to purchase such products legitimately, are quite willing to do so. However there are a few caveats; firstly the products must be of the highest possible use-value. In other words, using the time-honoured advantage of consumer sovereignity in such a market, the products provide what the consumer wants. It also means that the designer must be able to provide sufficient support supplements to keep the gamer interested in their product and product line. Finally, if the designer wants to convert their hobby activity that brings in a few pennies into something that approaches a low-paid job, then they must be able to provide a game system that has sufficient depth and detail to ensure continuing interest.

Independent RPGs of the 2000s have largely satisfied the first criteria and, in some cases, the second. Certainly for many of these designers they don't particularly care and nor are they dependent on any income received on their product. They have some innovative ideas, they've put them into a game system, and perhaps a few or several hundred other people will find them interesting as well. If they make a bit of money, then that should pay for the cost of their website for a while, or maybe the huckster fees for a couple of conferences. Rather like this modest journal, the activity is carried out because the people involved just love gaming. For those independent publishers and designers who are looking for their games to provide a more substantial and ongoing source of income, a game system that incorporates the above as well as detail is required. To date, the best examples of such a product is undoubtedly "Burning Wheel" and "Mouse Guard", albeit it is noted that the latter is not available for sale in electronic format. As a whole however, the technological and design trajectories favour independent games and publishers and also the quality of such games. It bodes well for the hobby.

BOOK REVIEW: THE NEW DEATH

by Lev Lafayette

The New Death and Others is a collection of some sixty wry aphorisms, short stories and poems by RPG Review contributor James Hutchins, published through Smashwords, an e-publisher aimed at new and independent authors, of which James certainly fits the bill. The book is available at http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/92126

Hutchins comes out fighting with the "The God of the Poor", and settles in with "How the Isle of Cats Got Its Name", the reasons for their smugness and why it is bad luck in some lands to play the harp. This alternative fantasy setting also seems to make its appearance in later tales such as the "The Scholar and the Moon", "The Jeweled City", "The Construction Workers of Telelee", "The God of the City of Dust", and "Sigrun and the Shepherd", all of which mixed well with other stories with a distinctly middle-eastern flavour. Overall, it reminded me a little of Jeff VanderMeer's "City of Saints and Madmen", and further publications with that setting, style, characterisation, and narrative could certainly add a great deal - not to mention provide some roleplaying potential.

Several of the stories ("The End", "A Date With Destiny", "Everlasting Fire", "Rumpelstiltskin", "The Producer", "Monsters", "The New Death", "Legend: The Story of Kevin Marley") are of the urban infernal variety which come across a little like a combination of Clerks and Dogma; rambling, quirky, but unfortunately with little concern for serious literary convention which said movies did provide. With elaboration and care one supposes that the short stories of this collection could have done so as well.
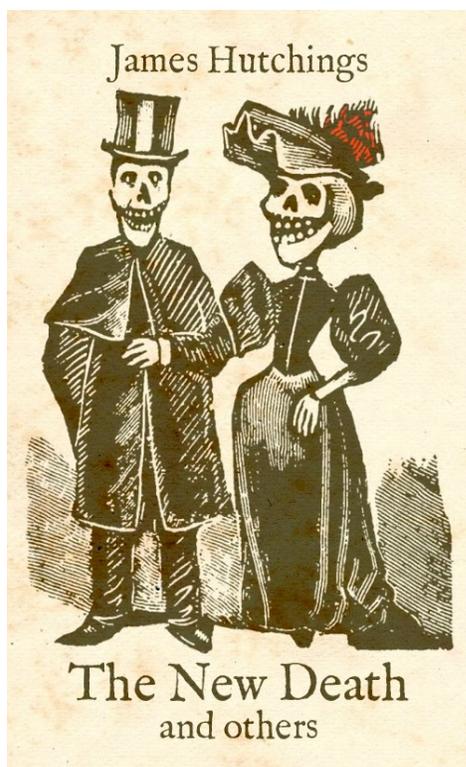
There is also poetry in this collection; the H.P. Lovecraft inspired "Under the Pyramids" is quite an acceptable piece of gothic, as is the "Prince of the Howling Forest", "The Apprenticeship" and "Charon" derived Lord Dunsany. In the contemporary Victorian style with a dash of humour, the prose piece "The Adventure of the Murdered Philanthropist" also fits this bill. Following a barbarian motif and derived from the works of Robert E. Howard, "The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune" has the feel of a tribal epic, whereas "The Garden of Adompha", derived from Clark Ashton Smith, has the feel of surreal science fantasy wih a deeply personal representation. There is certainly good potential here for a collection of poems directly inspired from s.f. authors.

It is an eclectic collection, and a stronger focus in genre and style would perhaps work better. There is certainly some great potential here, but it comes across as a little too quirky and irreverant to literary conventions at times, especially when it is clear that there is more than sufficient talen to produce some seriously good work. Nevertheless with a wide range of styles with a distinct brevity and a bargain price, it certainly represents excellent value for time and money, without the onerous burden of making a larger investment of dedication. Certainly one can enjoy this text and look forward to future publications by Mr. Hutchins.

COMPUTER/CONSOLE GAME REVIEWS

by Matt Lindus

Defense Grid : The Awakening

When I bought this, I was hoping for a decent tower defense game, and what I got was quite a good game indeed. It follows a story of a computer and a new controller (you) defending a planet against an invading alien race. you start out with limited technology to defend, and over the course of the game you gain more advanced weaponry (towers) until you have all 10 of the different towers the game offers.

During the 20 levels, you have to use the designated build locations, which don't always affect the path of the aliens, and the variety of towers that shoot, set on fire, electrocute, bombard, slow down and shoot out of the air, to stop the aliens from taking your 24 power cores and running off with them. When you kill an alien, you gain some resources so you can build more towers, or possibly upgrade ones that you already have, to inflict more damage. There are many varieties of alien also, with some that are shielded, can shield others, or that carry smaller ones that only get released after being killed themselves. And then there are the bosses. Big, strong lumbering beasts, or speedy monsters with more than normal health.

All of this is nice, and then you get the real enjoyable part of the game (at least for me). All the different map challenges asides from the basic story mode. 18 different types of challenge. Some being harder forms of the story, some easier. Some with no resources to gain, some that you don't gain any interest on what you have stored in reserve. And some where you only have 1 core, or the cores don't float back to base, and other modes where the aliens just keep coming and coming for many more waves than normal.

Each level, and each mode in that, has a basic survival goal of 1 remaining core and a minimal score, a silver goal that needs either 12 or all 24 cores remaining and a significant score, and a gold goal, which can be quite tough on some of the levels. I accept nothing less than gold myself and it took many hours of play, and a decent amount of optimising on some levels and some challenges to achieve this. But it was always fun.

Even with just the base game without the DLC that will be covered in next weeks review, I find this a compelling game to play. If you like tower defense games at all, this game is a must try. If you aren't sure about them, it could be a good idea to check this title out to see what you think. I also think that younger players will enjoy this game as much as older, though some of the strategic placement of towers may be difficult for them.

Rush

Rush is a nice little puzzle game, where the object is to guide a series of rolling blocks into their correct goal locations by using control switches to modify how they move. As the game goes on, you get more blocks, different coloured blocks, limited control switches, and most frustratingly I think, levels where you can't really see what is going on due to the level being in the way of itself. Even with a pretty decent camera to move around and change the angle of view, there were some levels where I just had to use some trial and error to figure out just what was going on in the blocked area. Or just stumble upon the solution by guessing correctly.

I quite enjoyed it, with it's 3 difficulties, along with some bonus levels that vary wildly in difficulty from dead easy to almost impossible. The easy levels are good for young players and people new to problem solving games, while the medium levels are enough to make most players think a bit at least. The hard levels really can tax the brain, and are for experienced problem solvers, people that have very good spacial navigation systems and people that like frustration.

It really is a game for people that like the puzzle games though, with very little for anyone else. If you like puzzles, pick it up and have a look. If you don't, then you'll likely not enjoy it.

The Wonderful End of the World

This Katamari clone brings a form of the console game onto PC for the first time. It doesn't have the story of Katamari, which can be a good thing if you are just up for a simple game. You wander around each of the many varied levels picking up objects from around you. The more you pick up, the bigger you get, the bigger things you can pick up.

The options and settings for the game are quite limited, and the lack of ability to change resolution made it unplayable on my old laptop, even though it's requirements aren't very high, it just didn't display within the screen. The other issue that I had with the game was that it didn't let you Alt-Tab without the game crashing when you try to return to it.

You can play through each level in Time Attack or Score modes. The limited time in attack mode can be pressuring, but is the more fun way to play the game in my opinion. Score mode gives you unlimited time to wander around and collect every item from level.

If you haven't played Katamari, I recommend this highly. If you have, but don't like the story, I'd also advise you to try this game. All in all it was quite a fun, simple game. Well worth it's small pricetag

MOVIE REVIEW: JOHN CARTER OF MARS

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Andrew Stanton

'Old-school science fiction' is one of those phrases that seems like it's too oxymoronic to be allowable to be used in common parlance and polite company. Even if it's meaningless semantically, I'm still going to use it because I think it's totally applicable. And what do I mean by such a phrase?

Tarzan in space.

Maybe Flash Gordon is a better example of where it's coming from. At the very least, it's not robots and star ships and ethical dilemmas about helping lichens on distant planetoids.

It's just about a guy, called Herman Merman, no, sorry, he's called John Carter (Taylor Kitsch), and he was on the losing side of the Civil War. The American one, not the one in England, or Liberia. In the pursuit of a cave full of gold, he mysteriously appears somewhere else. Somewhere very much else.

Without him knowing it, he's turned up on Mars, which the locals call Barsoom. And on Barsoom, there are really tall green four-armed Martians, some other reddish looking 'white' human types, and some shapeshifting shitstirrers, who look like whoever they want. It's too difficult to unpack the racial implications of much of this stuff, so it's easier to just drop it on the ground, and back away quietly.

At the very least it's not as obviously retrograde as that other paragon of science fiction, being Dances with Avatars.

John Carter notices something strange about the planet, being the fact that he seems to treat it like one great big trampoline. Someone else comes along and explains to him later that it possibly has something to do with his body being accustomed to the higher gravity of Earth, which means that he's like some kind of goddamn superhero on Barsoom, jumping like a hypercaffeinated monkey all over the place.

The green many-armed Martians, or Barsoomians, I guess, at first marvel at him, then they want to kill him, then they want to kill him more, then they love him and want to have his babies. Which brings me to another point: their

parenting skills leave much to be desired. Sure, I know they've got a completely different physiology and such, but their brutal approach to selecting which hatchlings live and which die makes our culture of helicopter parenting and co-sleeping seem positively precious in comparison.

John Carter, of Virginia, doesn't give a tinker's dam about the Barsoomian issues going on, being some villain (Dominic West) trying to take over the city of Helium by hook and by crook, because all he wants is to get back to his cave of gold. But once he spots a Princess, in fact a Princess of Mars called Dejah Thoris (Lynn Collins), he gets all patriotic and concerned as to what happens to this red planet. Yes, pussy clearly makes the universe go round, and so it should.

This film is entirely buccaneering and derring-do, and it's not the poorer for it. Until the end of the flick, which poorly bookends the flick with scenes on Earth dealing with Carter's nephew Edgar Rice Burroughs (in the clumsiest nod to the author himself of this series of books that probably started a lot of teenage boys off masturbating something like 90 years ago), it's an enjoyable enough action flick. It definitely harkens back to an earlier time and place (not just chronologically), delivering a flick which is meant to be more fun than thoughtful, more mobile than philosophical. I admit that I was thinking of Flash Gordon a lot while I was watching this, although there's nowhere near the same level of camp.

A lack of camp isn't necessarily a good or a bad thing. Some flicks, with camp removed, have nothing. Some flicks, with camp abundant, have nothing. What's Rocky Horror without camp? Nothing. What's Glee with camp? Less than nothing. So it's not an evil in and of itself. The (very slight) camp elements here don't really affect it in a negative way, though it's debatable as to what more campiness would have brought to the table.

These kinds of stories are still, by their very nature, pretty fantastical, without any need to be grounded in any way. It's a Boys Own adventure, and it could have just as easily been some Englishman finding some lost world in the middle of a London taxi cab, or a girl going through a wardrobe and finding a magical world filled with man goats, dozy dotes and talking beavers.

Did I care about the story? Not really. I would defy anyone, man or child, girl or woman to 'care' about the story going on here. I barely understood who all these people were, or why the ultimate villain was doing what they were doing, orchestrating events and manipulating all sides of the conflict to some nefarious end.

But it didn't matter. All we could really care about was whether John Carter gets to kick some ass and score with the hot Martian babe. I seem to think he had more chemistry with the green girl Sona than he did with Dejah Thoris, who is ever so smart and ever so skimpily clad whenever they think they can get away with it. Maybe that hook-up of the three of them getting it on in low gravity in is one of the sequels coming up.

Not that there are likely to be many of those. This is being touted as one of the biggest bombs of all time, and that's a bit unfair. It's not an intelligence-insulting shitfest of a film that deserved to be ignored by people in droves. Of stupid crowd pleasing summer Hollywood blockbuster-y type flicks, this is one of the less egregious examples, and it tries to distance itself from the morass of similar flicks by sticking so carefully to the original story that it at least feels like somewhat of a different story than what we're used to.

That being said, I can see why audiences who equate the words "science fiction movies" with "giant exploding robots in incoherent 2 ½ hour monstrosities" would have been disappointed with this. It's not mindless enough, and doesn't have enough explosions, though it has several. And several is not enough.

I was engaged, but it did lose me somewhere along the way, I have to admit. I think it's reasonably good for what it professes to be, and that's not a bad thing. Sure, it might look generic as all hell, but for that you can blame Disney, which even took the more bone-headed approach of trying to promote it as "John Carter", as if that name alone was going to inflame the loins of the masses, and they were afraid of having "of Mars" in the title, in case anyone foolishly thought it was about a guy called John Carter who goes to Mars.

John Carter of Mars it is, and so it should have been. As the title character, Taylor Kitsch does a reasonable job. He's more than entertaining even at the beginning before he goes to Mars, as a smartass who wants nothing more to do with notions of duty and honour and hygiene. He shares some early, somewhat funny scenes with Bryan Cranston (who seems strange with hair, and bushy hair at that, used to him as we are from Breaking Bad), and mostly manages to be believable in his interactions with people and beings who, thanks to the magic of CGI, aren't really there.

He doesn't have to do that much, though, let's be honest. Lynn Collins does a lot, and probably overdoes a bit of stuff in order to not just seem like a bit of fluff, but those blue glowing eyes do most of the acting. And they act pretty well.

Unfortunately, not for her, but for me, there's a way of reducing the complexities of a story down to something simple in order to keep it relatable for an audience. In this flick, the conflict between species, and the war to control the city of Helium is reduced to Dejah Thoris not wanting to marry her enemy, despite being told to by her father. When the solution to and source of the conflict in a science fiction flick ends up being an arranged wedding that is solved by a different wedding, your movie instantly becomes more comparable with a Star Wars film, and that's not a good thing.

If there's one decision they made in the flick that I thought was, what's the word I'm looking for, oh yes, retarded, it's the apparently crucial scene where John is battling a horde of motherfuckers, which is intercut with his memories of burying some people he was quite partial to back during the war. It's nuts, and it cheapens both elements that they're poorly trying to interweave. It doesn't enlarge our understanding of who John Carter was or is motivated by (as if we goddamn care); it just makes the flick look bad, or timid, or dickless, take your pick.

Overall, though, I did not hate this flick, though I was hardly stunned and overthrown by it. It was a pleasant enough experience for two hours, though the ending did make me think I'd wasted my time and money.cWe have so little of both, people, in these troubled times. Use accordingly.

6 times the solution to most unwanted wedding scenarios should never be actual weddings out of 10

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"We are strong, because we despise weakness! Let them be crushed, like unhatched eggs!" – the perfect message for Easter, Jebus would be proud – John Carter of Mars

*Originally published at http://movie-reviews.com.au/content/john-carter-mar*s

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