System Design

Interview with Ron Edwards ... Innovative RPG Reviews (Sandman, Amber, Hero Wars) ... Multi-GM Campaigns ... Evil Races ... RPG Theory ... RuneQuest in Glorantha Designer's Notes ... Rules Lawyers ... Tension and Validation ... D&D 5e Races ... Moana Movie Review ... and much more!
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ADMINISTRIVIA

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Cooperative News, Letters, and Editorial

Cooperative News

Since our last RPG Review the Cooperative has produced another issue of RPG Review (obviously), held our regular gaming groups, movie nights, and of course, did plenty of development in Papers & Paychecks. We also shifted a big chunk of the Maylands branch of our gaming library (we have one - very good - member in Western Australia) to Coburg (about 90% of our membership lives in Victoria). So currently some 274 items out of probably 350 in total is catalogued. That's not too bad for a small gaming cooperative, and one hastens to add, one gets an excellent return on their membership from just borrowing a couple of items per annum from the library.

One major decision that we have come to is to announce the content of the next issue. Despite our global reach in terms of RPG Review itself, the membership is very much centered in the Antipodes. It just so happens there is not an unreasonable number of RPG designers in this part of the world either - so why not a special issue for Australian and New Zealand games? From the Antipodes there has been Lace and Steel, Albedo, Hunter Planet, Super Squardon, Elric!, EPOCH, and many more. Also, it seems that several members of the Chaosium team are now based here.

Apart from that to be honest it's been all quiet on the Cooperative front. We are largely in a position of 'operations' rather than 'projects', although there should be another announcement for the latter category in the next issue. It might even have something to do with the thematic content of that Antipiodean issue and may even be related to a certain series of off-beat contemporary books with a bit of an occult orientation. Can you guess what this might be?

Until then, enjoy this issue of RPG Review.
Dear Editor,

Following the BBQ-gate outrage I was triggered by your PC* attack on the "juvenile subconscious" in transhuman roleplaying. Shirley the whole point of roleplaying has been 98% about the exploration of the juvenilia of our shared gestalt, and the remaining 3% some kind of liberal free thinking fantasy crap about Tékumel***? That is, IHMO, what I said to my 32nd level BlitzerBoy Cyborg-Elf-Magic-User-Twink when I saw your outrageous comments. "Sausage in a bun!". Hah! We all know where your mind was. Next thing you'll be saying is that 40k miniatures can't have mustard on their prawns.

Outraged of Victoria***
/* Player Character/
/** I hear there are only 17 levels in Tékumel, OUTRAGE!/
/*** Victoria, Sword Coast, Faerun/
***** Amongst the satire there may be a point here...

Editorial; Game Design

From some perspectives, RPG design is one of the more difficult tasks in the hobby. It is probably not from the perspective of the RPG producer, having to juggle the right balance between online and physical copies, and calculating printing, storage, and shipping. It is probably not the perspective of the game store owner who is trying to shift boxes of books from warehouse to customer. Nor is from the perspective of the individual GM trying to get that spark of imagination going to lay out a plot for the Friday night session. Nor even for the individual player trying to construct a consistent element of their backstory, or figuring out using the rules and their resources how to get out of yet another tricky predicament the GM has placed them in.

There may even be a bit of a temptation among many players to think, "Hey, this game has been a lot of fun, but some of the rules are a bit strange. I think I could write a whole bunch of new rules and bolt them on to this existing game and call it a new game" - and so dozens of variations of Dungeons & Dragons were born over the decades. Some were genuinely innovative (RuneQuest, Champions, Vampire, HeroQuest, FATE etc). Others claimed to be so, and really weren't (Imagine) and pretty much died out as a result. Others expressly claimed to be derivative and celebrated their origins (Castles & Crusades, OSR). Many thought that the path to good design was more detail - more classes, more spells, more weapons, increasingly complex combat systems (Chivalry & Sorcery, Powers & Perils, Rolemaster). These systems creaked and groaned under the weight of trying to combine a model with a sense of reality itself, and despite heroic efforts many fell on the wayside of making such an effort.

The game designer knows that theirs is a difficult and often almost thankless task. Navigating the pathway between playability and realism, between innovation and familiarity, trying to design with different creative agendas in mind - and all whilst being try to the thematic considerations they started with. After that there should be playtesting - and blind playtesting. The discoveries of what you thought was obvious is obtuse to others, or the rule that you implemented that seemed middle-of-the-road is discovered to produce outrageously unbalanced results, etc. All of this is apart from the publisher or crowdfunders breathing down your neck for a product. Sure you could sit down and produce something substandard, but you're a perfectionist and you want this game to be *good*.
I am sure that many designers recognize these words. I am not, of course, a game designer by profession by any stretch of the imagination: I look after high performance computing systems and teach postgraduate researchers how to use them. Prior to that I had a previous career in advocacy and politics. But this is not to say that I haven’t dabbled: a Rolemaster rules supplement, a chapter for Fox Magic, and of course, most recently, Papers & Paychecks. I have had the privilege of being an playtester of RuneQuest, Traveller, Deluxe Basic Role Playing, and most recently, Eclipse Phase. This is an active hobby for me - and having undertaken a few hundred detailed reviews I have to say I really feel for designers, especially those who I can see who have made and effort.

So after some thirty three issues of RPG reviews, this issue is dedicated to game design - and we start with one of the foremost theorists and practitioners in the hobby with an interview with Ron Edwards. Following that yours truly has a look at some of the more innovative contributions to the hobby - not necessarily games that became famous or were successful, but contain some interesting design features that we must recognise. After this is a review of the Krononauts time-travel campaign - which has featured in previous issues of RPG Review, but this time from the perspective of running a multi-GM game. After that Levi Kornelsen gives his thoughts on evil races in RPGS, and RPG Design, followed by a lengthy compilation piece by Jeff Richard on the new RuneQuest. Neil Litherland and Sean Icarus provide practical advice on rules lawyers, narrative tension, and player's intent. Finally, Karl Brown peeks behind the curtain in D&D 5th edition for the mathematics behind the race designs. Finally, the ever regular Andrew Moshos treats us to yet another Disney princess movie.

There is, of course, a long way to go with game design. From the early days where the basic structure was handed down from D&D as individual characters in a wider tactical environment and a fantastic setting, explorations in implementation and setting grew from there. Emphasis on character personality and motivations developed in a systemic manner, along with setting integration, and more recently, story-driven games. All during this time matter of rules complexity, consistency, and scope have been thrashed about. One thing is certain - for contemporary and future researchers of RPG culture there is now, and will be, a very rich collection of material to draw upon.

Get that design hat on, Make more games. Make better games. Aim to make the best game.

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Ron Edwards Interview

with Ron Edwards

Hi Ron, and welcome to RPG Review. We'll start with what is a typical question; how did you first get involved in the RPG hobby, and what sort of games were you playing? How does that differ to what you play now?

Hi Lev and hi RPG.net! I began role-playing in 1978 as a tween-to-teen, using a bunch of texts spanning the range of Dungeons & Dragons at the time, including the original pamphlets, articles in Dragon Magazine, the J. Eric Holmes version in 1977, a Greyhawk supplement or two, and the AD&D Monster Manual. I also played Tunnels & Trolls, RuneQuest, and my favorite, the early versions of The Fantasy Trip (Melee, Wizard, In the Labyrinth). The culture of popular fantasy and role-playing was very different at that time, and also by region. In my case it overlapped with underground and newsstand comics, with rock and roll, with the forthright and psychedelic fantasy and science fiction of the time, and with the counterculture of the California coast.

I won't list the many role-playing games I played through the decades. The most prevalent would be the early editions of Champions throughout the 80s and early 1990s, with honorable mention to Stormbringer, GURPS, Rolemaster, and Cyberpunk. The 90s, especially Amber and Over the Edge, brought an experimental phase when I played well over 200 games with several different groups. As Sorcerer came into shape, we shifted into older games like Marvel Super Heroes and many others, a lot of newer games especially the then-titled Hero Wars, my designs in playtest, and playtesting a lot of other people's drafts. I won't say "if you know it, I've played it," but I think there'd be more hits than misses.

My first experiences in role-playing were marked by enthusiastic, diverse design and by genuine love for fantasy and other speculative adventure, across the titles I mentioned and more that I encountered. Therefore the fun and diversity of role-playing right now is a lot like it was then – which I consider to be a huge improvement over the intervening decades, and which I'll talk about a little more a few questions down.

What was it that interested you in RPG theory and game design? What are the practical effects that you see in RPG theory in actual play? How did your own ideas about game theory develop from GNS to The Big Model? What are their key differences?

I'm not really sure about being interested in "theory" as such, because almost all role-players talk (and argue) about how the activity works. I haven't done anything special in that regard beyond providing a venue and holding the discussions to adequate intellectual standards. One thing that does stand out in my history comes from Champions, in finding that perfect agreement about the comics inspiration and the desire to make a great one through play ran into a lot of power-problems at the table. That led to a long history of thinking about the fiction generated through play, which all role-playing does: when it is or isn't a story, and if it is, how it got that way.
You asked about ideas with initials, so here's that history, briefly. Usenet discussions in the mid-to-late 1990s had unearthed the possibility of profoundly different priorities at a role-playing table, to the point of simply not being there for the same purposes at all. That's where the terms Gamism, Simulationism, and Dramatism appeared, and the concept had been named the Threefold Model. I read these discussions but was not a contributor, and in 1999, in an essay first posted at the Gaming Outpost, I referenced those ideas and wrote about how they might or might not relate to techniques during play, using Jonathan Tweet's terms Fortune, Karma, and Drama for the techniques. To keep the terms from overlapping, I renamed Dramatism Narrativism, as Tweet's "Drama" had been coined first. In following internet discussions, "GNS" became the most common referent especially as it became clear that I was working farther and farther away from the Threefold.

But it also became clear to me that merely talking about priorities wasn't enough; we needed to be discussing role-playing as a social event, which was even bigger than individual, or better, expected shared-group priorities. The name "Big Model" refers to this "bigness," starting with everything that plays into who we are and why we sit down to play together. Therefore the biggest level or layer is the social event, the next layer down or in is the imagined material as we talk and listen, and within that, is the system, or how we make things "go" in the imagined material. I think to think of the outer layers not only giving context to the inner ones, but themselves being reinforced and enjoyed based on what happens "inside." The key point is that these layers hold together either well, because we share a creative priority of some kind, or it holds together badly or falls apart, for a number of reasons including differing priorities.

Let's see – oh yes, it's not a model of all role-playing like some huge monster diagram of all the possibilities. You can't find your "zone" or a given game "on" the model. Instead, it's more like a lens, a way to look at one real-life actual group of people playing a real game in real time, past or present, to see what they're doing, how the real-people and imagined-fiction interact, and in this one case, what for.

You might be nodding and saying, "But that's obvious." I thought it was obvious too. I won't bother listing the myriad of outright bizarre objections people come up with. One sore point, perhaps the sorest, is that "priorities," in the above paragraph, are not referring to styles or details of play which can be blended or compromised. I mean really, really different priorities. This ran against a number of cherished ideas in the hobby, e.g. that anyone can or should play with anyone and that all role-playing is a monolithic compatible activity. Another sore point is the concept of "system does matter," which is that the inner layers/levels of the model aren't freely interchangeable – that how we make things "go" in the fiction does affect how we enjoy it, and can be designed to reinforce what we came for.

Since I was obviously not using the Threefold at all any more (say by 2002, probably earlier), I gave the priorities sort-of poetic names instead: Story Now, Step On Up, The Right to Dream. Contrary to some accusations, I am not especially invested in "there must be three" or any such dogmatic claim. My own views toward the diversity of these things – Creative Agendas as I called them – underwent further discussion at the Forge for ten years, and I'm happy to talk about that with anyone who's curious. At this moment I'm carrying on four such conversations, and have been doing so with lots of different people for years.

I think I've explained what the Threefold was (not me), what so-called "GNS" was (me thinking about the Threefold and system issues), and what the Big Model is (pretty much what I came up with, at least for ongoing purposes). I want to stress too that the essays in 2002-2003 were written as a discussion technique among a limited number of people, about a hundred maybe, not as a finished or fixed endpoint intended to serve as a public statement. Far from it in fact.

You also asked about practical applications, which I think is backwards. Well before the internet took off, and therefore before any context of websites, I knew that any and all thinking about role-playing (what it is, design thoughts, whatever) had to arise out of real play experiences. What I called "theory" during the early years of the Forge wasn't thought-to-action, but action-to-thought, highly empirical. So I'd say "let's try!" about many games of approximately 1999-2003, not only my own work, but especially independently-published parallels like Orkworld, The Riddle of Steel, Hero Wars, and Burning Wheel, and literally dozens of small homebrews from anywhere including surprises like The Pool. The practical applications were where the action was (and is); the ideas arose from thinking about what we'd just seen happening in play.

As far as practical applications from those ideas go, well, it's a big list. The Forge forums weren't deliberately started as a design laboratory, but I suppose it was inevitable given all the play and dialogues. A lot of it was playful but a lot of it
turned out surprisingly well, and some of the most well-known games of today emerged from it directly or indirectly.

One theory based comment that generated an enormous amount of attention is when you described the White Wolf Storyteller system as being decidedly not about creating stories as such, even it included an emphasis on setting and a largely pre-determined narrative. As part of that discussion you referred to people who had been exposed to this as a "storytelling" RPG were suffering from "brain damage".

That discussion generated an enormous amount of noise, not attention. Attention implies that people read what I wrote, not second-degree references to it. In the first post using that phrase, I outlined three preliminary points in boldface. Big, easy statements, pretty important ones. I have not yet met a person who is both upset about what they think I said, and can tell me what those points were. Therefore I'm not immediately sympathetic to people unless I know they've done the reading, in any meaningful sense of reading. After all, to this day I encounter people who tell me they angrily went to the original posts to see for themselves what awful thing I said, and came away surprised at the coherent things I actually said.

I want to work a bit with your phrasing about the White Wolf system. "Not about creating stories as such" seems to be to be supported by the phrase "a largely pre-determined narrative," but you phrased it as if the latter was contrary to the former. It is evident to me that a system which provides a pre-determined narrative cannot serve toward creating stories, any more than a detailed musical score can be performed to create a new song. They simply aren't the same things. If by the term Storyteller, one is to understand that the GM will deliver a fine story to my waiting ears, then well and good, but to be told in the same breath that I, too, will be making Real Story via play – that falls apart instantly.

I'm not trying to dodge anything about this topic. But a lot of the questions I get seem like they're coming out of nowhere.

Two questions arise - mainly not RPG-related it must be said. Firstly, a clarification that what you are describing here is a close relationship between the meaning and the understanding of words and they way that is associated with neurological states, and secondly - and quite tangentially - what sort of influence your non-gaming profession in the biological sciences has had on your ideas about game design and its implementation.

With apologies, this is a good example of what I mean. I don't see a question in that paragraph. I can't even construct or infer a question from the first part, "a clarification that what you are describing here is a close relationship between the meaning and the understanding of words and they [the] way that is associated with neurological states." (There's an old Doonesbury cartoon where the confused journalists call out, "A verb, Senator, we need a verb!")

Well, I think people's negative reactions were based on not understanding how a mismatch between symbolic expressions and the meaning is described as "brain damage" to some biological perspectives.

Personally I understand the argument, although coming from a more symbolic and linguistic approach it's not how I would describe it.

I see. OK, the first thing is that I can't see myself enter into special pleading about "what I really meant," or "in biology, we mean," as that never works. I think I rephrased it enough to make sense to Clyde Rhoer – who was definitely not sympathetic to the original posts at the outset – in his Theory from the Closet interview: [http://theoryfromthecloset.com/2007/05/14/show008-interview-with-ron-edwards/](http://theoryfromthecloset.com/2007/05/14/show008-interview-with-ron-edwards/). I'm happy to address any questions people have after checking it out.

I guess I'm big on letting readers come to their own conclusions. The link to the original post can be found in a useful summary by a third party a while ago, here (read the second post first, as you'll see from the author): [http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=33122.0](http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=33122.0).

For the biology question, how tangential is it?

Totally tangential.
OK! The most obvious I-am-a-biologist content in my games shows up in Sex & Sorcery, in which I use some evolutionary type stuff in grounding my talk about gender and sexuality. But I should stress that I'm a real evolutionary biologist, not one of these celebrity-author yahoos who appropriated the term despite having neither training nor any research record. Pretty much anything touted as "the biology of behavior," particularly for humans, is grossly removed from what we actually do in that field. So you won't find any essentialist men-are-this, women-are-that talk from me in that book.

I blogged for a while about this and lots of related things, not too long ago, so if anyone wants to see where I'm coming from about evolutionary stuff, especially thought, behavior, sex, humanity, selfhood, et cetera, check out Man Nor Beast, http://hyenaswine.wordpress.com. It's good! (I plan to take it up again later in 2017, too.)

You can also see the evidence of the course I taught for years and years, Rat's Eye View, all about rats in every possible way, in my game It Was a Mutual Decision. Well, sort of in a reversed way, because as I mention in that text, everything "rat" in the game actually refers to stuff people do, not rats.

Another course I taught, although not as much, was called Birth and Death in Chicago, and I drew from some of the content in it when coming up with lots of details in my game Circle of Hands. Especially the issues of handling the dead, why people do it, and what the diversity in doing so may or may not mean, which is also discussed in detail at the biology blog. Now that I think of it, too, I really like the way that game brings local geography and ecology into each session; it's probably the only setting I've done for which I've said to any extent, "Now what kinds of critters are where, and why."

There's always "Do dragons have penises?" too, which was born right here at RPG.net; you can read the, uh, lengthened version at http://adept-press.com/ideas-and-discourse/other-essays/do-dragons-have-penis-answered/.

One of the very significant contributions that you made to the hobby was the co-establishment, maintenance, and participation in The Forge, which helped a number of independent games designers in the development of their ideas about game design and publishing. Do you think the industry, at this stage, is particularly well suited for variant game and independent game systems? What do you think is the future of the hobby in terms of technological shifts?

Let me include some acknowledgments. The original site, Hephaestus' Forge, was founded by me and Ed Healy in 1999. The successor site and forum, The Forge, appeared in 2001, founded by me and Clinton R. Nixon. A while later, 2007 or so I guess, I'm not certain, Vincent Baker took over Clinton's administrative role.

Now to your question. I do not concern myself with the industry because I don't think there is one, for table-top role-playing. I have written carefully about the term, which to be real, needs to have an economic basis that can support a substantial group of中间men and service providers. Table-top role-playing publishing doesn't do that and never has. What we have instead is an active creative hobby, at most a cottage industry, in which the creators are a grassroots subset of the consumers, that is, we are purchasers and practitioners among everyone else. A better way to look at it is that everyone in the hobby is a creator when and if they bother to write things down, creations are published insofar as they're made available in any form (for purchase or not), and anyone buys anything when they feel like it. There is no system, no industry based on production and sales. If you want to point to the stores, table-top role-playing has always tagged along with other types of games, with comics, with pop culture gear, and (badly) with licenses, and the typical fate of the game store is either to survive on these other products or to fold. Also, venture capital poured into role-playing publishing as such has generally failed.

Unlike some, perhaps, I think of this as a good thing. The question for me isn't "suited to the industry" but rather, "suited to a given creative role-player." There isn't anything big or external for variant game and independent game systems to be suited to, nor, conversely, is there anything for the reverse, like a one-and-only-ever nonvariant game system, to be suited to either. Therefore, as long as real play and real creative fun is being had, among us actual practitioners of the hobby, then we're going to see variant game and independent game systems appearing all over the place, and this is me with my fist upraised going "Yes!" Any industry or attempt to make one or benefit one can flail along behind us all it wants.
Here’s a hopeful note. In 2002 and 2003, I attended the GAMA Trade Show in Las Vegas and campaigned store-owners hard for two things: (i) to showcase small-press games as their own shared brand, the "indie shelf" if you will; and (ii) to emphasize the store as a play-space with a positive social environment. Luke Crane followed up the next year with a similar effort, and after that more and more people did so. These efforts had an impact, especially in contrast to the collapse of the three-tier system for hobby game sales just a couple years later, as I’d predicted. So there are some great stores today which could be said are the beginning of an industry worthy of the name. (Locally: the Dice Dojo in Chicago – hi guys!)

For your final question, I just received it almost verbatim as a panelist at a conference in Milan, Italy, and I will give you the answer that I provided there. The visible array of high-end products, across digital, electronic, table-top, and other games, is the flotsam and jetsam of the hobby. It’s not “gaming.” It’s the little bitty squeezed-out point of profiting at the moment, a tiny minority of what’s really happening. Focusing on my area of interest, table-top role-playing, the real and actual hobby is alive and vibrant, as long as there are people scribbling on sheets, rolling dice (or whatever instrument is in a given game), writing down their hacks and innovations whenever they feel like it, making those available somehow, and staying in communication somehow. This was the case when "high end" role-playing products simply meant staples that weren’t already rusted when you bought it, when it meant a nice box for the stapled pamphlets to sit in, when it meant a line or wad of supplements marching down the shelf, when it meant umpty-ump zillions of dollars raised in crowdfunding … whatever you want to point to as “the big ones.” It’ll be the case in the future too, whatever the new medium may be or whatever equipment or venue is involved.

The one historical point when infrastructural change really happened came in the very late 1990s when the internet restored something that had become lost or invisible. Going back two decades from then, almost all role-playing publishing was grassroots, and almost all independent (creator-owned). Contrary to hobby mythology, the diversity and innovation in role-playing design at that time was very wide and exciting, not least because people found they could jump right into it too. The next twenty to twenty-five years obliterated this activity from view, mainly due to historical artifacts like the three-tier distribution system and related matters. Briefly, efforts to get good games into view and into sustainable publication were doomed; they constantly appeared and immediately disappeared. I should point out that the so-called successes, or dominant, or most visible, or most "respected" games were not themselves sustainable – the financial fate of TSR from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s is well-known; FASA ran itself into the ground; the only two successful newcomers relied on independent personal wealth to leverage production value and shelf space, and one of them nearly went bankrupt as the other hit it big with a non-RPG product.

The internet made the ordinary role-player’s play-and-design, grassroots activity visible again, that is, our own activity was finally made apparent to ourselves. My contribution was to identify this as the resurgence of the hobby, which had been stifled by the distribution system and gatekeeping, in solidarity with and memory of the years I had experienced as a teenager.

Around 2010 The Forge was closed down, and - thankfully - kept in archive mode. The reasons given at the time was the presence of some "difficult participants", the fact that it was meant to be a temporary project in the first place, and that most of the work in RPG theory development had been successfully carried out with new games from the people who engaged in the forum. What do you see as the successor sites to The Forge? Where are the best and active sites for debating RPG design and independent publication issues?

I have to correct your characterization of the reasons for closing the Forge.

I didn't tag "difficult participants" as a reason. I did, and do, dislike the escalation in pretense and posturing that occurred around 2005, but by 2007 or so, those responsible had largely fled. In this thread from 2007, http://www.indie-rgps.com/archive/index.php?topic=25257.0, discussing the eventual closure, I described my dissatisfaction with specific kinds of posting at the Forge then and a little bit after, and how Clinton and I solved it.

By about 2009, and through the Forge's end, I was generally happy with the good will people brought to the discussions there, especially by and with newcomers. Around 2010, when I ran the second round of the Ronnies contests, the community was exactly as I enjoyed it most: an ongoing wave of newcomers with a nice presence of constructive people who’d been there longer, but themselves also steadily exiting as a wave to do their own things as publishers.

More significantly, it was never the purpose of the Forge to establish a fixed body of design ideas or philosophy of play, or whatever you mean by "work in RPG theory development." Not only did I not cite that as a reason for closing the site, but the very idea that developing thoughts and other idea-work ("theory" I suppose, if you must) could be finished at all, ever, is weird to me, horrifying even.

The accomplishment, which I stated several times, was to re-establish creator ownership, or as it later came to be called, DIY, as a viable, respected context for publishing role-playing games and associated material. In 1999, any such thing was aggressively dismissed and even suppressed in terms of visibility and sales, by nearly all participants in RPG publishing, to an extent I think you'd find unbelievable. By 2009, it was widely recognized as the beating heart of the hobby. Like it or not, like me or not, like the Forge or not, that's what the site accomplished, and that's what I cited as the reason for closing it.

A lot of things happened along the way to empower DIY, creator ownership, independence (all the same thing) for role-playing publishing. Paypal, for instance, and the appearance of multiple play-oriented local conventions, pioneered by Forge participants modeled on the booth we did for 11 years at GenCon. In 1999, all but a very few people needed a Forge for the resources, the networking, and the necessary information to see their game become a reality; in 2009, those things are available far and wide.

Many of them were born directly from the Forge, although the serial numbers are often scrubbed off. The OSR is a perfect example; you'd be surprised at how many names therein were mentored at the Forge and/or inspired by my games and similar participants there. But whether or not that's the case for a given example, the point is that the Forge was the only place to champion the Hobby of Equals, as Paul Czege called it, in which transparent publishing was a subset of real play, rather than a separated gulf between august, closeted designers and grateful, infantilized fans. Now that viewpoint is acknowledged, respected, and supported across multiple communities and venues and activities. The Forge is dead; long live the Forge.

Turning to your own games, do you think there is there an consistent design goal in what you've produced? Many do orient themselves to a rules-light approach, albeit with some interesting permutations (e.g., Trollbabe). Others are stylistically orientated towards the whimsical (Elfs), whereas others still deal with a largely ignored thematic consideration in RPGs, that of romance and sex (It Was A Mutual Decision, S/lay w/Me).

For consistent design goal, absolutely: that any inspiration from the initial contact with the text turns into dynamic, personal, and rewarding play. I think of my games as musical instruments, and if people can make music of their own with them – informed by the instruments' capability of course – then I feel really good about my contribution to it.
I don't regard the term "rules-light" highly. Trollbabe, for instance, differs from many role-playing designs in that every single moment of play is acknowledged and managed through the rules, and is therefore the most rules-heavy design I know, not the lightest. People don't notice "rules" unless they don't like them, so I usually avoid terms like "light" or "transparent" or "crunch" – they don't describe the games so much as the expectations or limitations of the person using them.

For an obvious example, Sorcerer, Trollbabe, and Circle of Hands feature extremely detailed, decision-heavy rules for complicated confrontations. The reason people call them "light" is that these rules are good. They enhance and excite the fiction, exploding the notion of "role vs. roll" entirely, because you really roll the dice as part of really role-playing. So no one thinks of them as heavy or crunchy despite being far more detailed and in-the-moment than other games described that way.

Maybe less obviously, one thing that's almost always absent in my designs is consensus. I like individual empowerment over one's agency in play, so that the fiction emerges from a lot of different input with no one depending on anyone else's approval or vetting. Add to that my enjoyment of "bounce," or ways for mechanical constraints to appear and disappear, and you get a real experiential gestalt across my games although each is very different in the moment.

Recurrent themes in my work include surrealism, anti-heroism, gender, messed-up or redeemed relationships, dark humor, a celebration of the body, psychedelica, a certain ruthlessness, and the interplay between morality and emotion. Sorcerer is pretty much these very things on a drug of your choice. My topics often display unusual or "underground" fantasy: Elfs, a humorous satire of early role-playing; Trollbabe, an inspiring adventure epic; It Was a Mutual Decision, a dark but sympathetic look at romantic breakups and were-rats; S/Lay w/Me, a two-player pulp fantasy romance; and Circle of Hands, set in a "mud and dung" Iron Age. I am deeply committed to pre-1980s concepts of fantasy and adventure, with roots back to the underground comics and pulps, to the adventure romances going back into the 19th century, and even into older mythology.

My Story Now series is a little different, composed of nonfiction books about historical conflicts that include short-text games as final chapters. These works advocate for a non-U.S.-centric perspective on such topics as communism, espionage, terrorism, and religion, so far including Spione: Story Now in Cold War Berlin, Shahida: Story Now in Civil War Beirut, and in preparation, Amerikkka: Story Now in the Radical U.S.A.

There are a bunch of playtest drafts at my site as well, including four odd little things concerning religion. As a non-religious person, it's a little mysterious why I got into the topic so creatively and strangely, and I confess I can't see them being commercially viable, but I like them a lot and enjoy trying them out.

In addition to these games there is of course Sorcerer, founded on exploring the moral question of "What will you do to get what you want?" using demons as proxies for magical effects (similar to Kill Puppies for Satan in that regard). It has been reviewed by a wide number of people and generally has come out on top with terms like "innovative" and "provocative". What are you thoughts on the relative success of the game?
"Thoughts" is pretty vague. As a guess … well, back in 1998 or 1999, my only aim was to make the thing available commercially on the internet, in digital form, slightly better produced and promoted than its initial appearance in 1996. "The thing" included by then the original versions of Sorcerer & Sword and The Sorcerer's Soul. In 2000 I felt a little jealous of the Apophis Consortium's game Obsidian, and I decided to throw money into printing a book version, and fully intended that this version would be a short run with no planned future. I frankly couldn't believe that I'd sell more than 500 copies, so printed 750, putting the completed supplements into place to follow within the next six months. After that, I figured, I could check off "publishing RPG book" from my life-list, keep it available as a PDF sale, and get back to simply playing.

That plan changed, obviously. Sorcerer established an income stream that powered Adept Press as such. I'm very happy about that. It is still encountered anew today, and with the same exciting, encouraging, and often mind-blowing results for role-players as it had over twenty years ago. I still love playing it with no hint of nostalgia, but rather with continuing surprise at what a few people can do, creatively, given the means.

Finally, it's been a while since we've seen new RPG products from yourself. What plans do you have, if any, in future RPG products?

Whoa there pardner, I've been busy as hell! I re-issued Sorcerer with annotations in 2013, I wrote and published Circle of Hands, which is a considerable chunk of original RPG game-and-setting, in 2015, and there are a bunch of playtest-this little projects at my site, including Doctor Chaos which I keep thinking is good, then forget it, then good, then forget it …

Then there's Adept Consulting which keeps me constantly elbows-deep in design discussions with people, and also nicely connected to both high-end and what I call "my backpack" efforts in the hobby.

I've been blogging about comics for over two years at Comics Madness, with a ton of discussion about super-powered role-playing scattered throughout it based on all sorts of games. Steve Long has been a guest there to discuss RPG history, play techniques, and vigilante comics with me.

Right now, I think what I need to work on isn't production but promotion. I do have some wild projects in mind, which at the moment are mostly scattered notes better suited for the table, like Amerikkka and maybe Doctor Chaos (damn that thing). However, the existing games are plenty powerful yet not as well-distributed or talked-about as they might be – sometimes I feel like the early Velvet Underground, "only sold a hundred copies but everyone who bought it formed their own band." So my plans for the second half of the year, following my family's move overseas, concern getting a better website/internet and convention presence. A plain-language actual text for my ideas about role-playing is under way, something people have bugged me about for a long time. You'll see me as a panelist and activity leader at GenCon this year, and if you're in Europe, look for me at a number of conventions there.
Innovations in RPG Design: Some Reviews

by Lev Lafayette

As any technology manager worth their salt will tell you, innovation involves risk. It can bring great rewards, but it can also fail, not because of failures in design, but because there is no market for the product. Some things catch on slowly over time, or with the ideas slowly making their way to other products; a cold comfort to the original designer.

In the RPG world there can be no doubt that Dungeons & Dragons itself was an incredibly innovative product. The very concept of shifting a wargame to a single-unit role was moment of genius. Doing this in a fantasy setting, a literary genre of some popularity at the time, established the foundations of entirely new hobby.

Games that came out afterwards were really variations upon Dungeons & Dragons, despite whatever real or imagined mechanical improvements or divergent settings. RuneQuest and Traveller are particularly well-known examples. Others built on from there - Rolemaster, for example, took a bit of RuneQuest, a bit of Dungeons & Dragons, and added its own magic to the mix. If there is any doubt in this consider what one would say to a newcomer to such games. It would be difficult not to blurt out "It's like Dungeons & Dragons but..."

The following reviews are of games which were really quite innovative in their design. Indeed, for one brought up on a staple of D&D-style games some would even question whether they were a roleplaying game in the first instance. They have are not necessarily success stories, nor have they necessarily been so successful to generate their own hobby-design. For that, D&D still remains the great-grandmother of the village (new villages, such as the gleaming towers of glass and steel known as MMORPGs and the colourful dress-ups known as LARPing and dinner games are derived innovations). But with the village of traditional RPGs, these three examples (Sandman, 1985; Amber 1991, and Hero Wars 2000) at least tried to cut some very new and special ground. One game which is not reviewed here that also represents a unique trajectory in its own right is D&D 4th edition (2008), which is an utterly solid gaming perspective, more board-game and trump-based card game than other RPGs – a review of that game is available in the very first edition of RPG Review, from September 2008.

Sandman: Map of Halal (1985)

Product and Introduction

The boxed set of Pacesetter's Sandman: Map of Halal is packed with material; a 64 page book of four single-session adventures, a GM screen, an introduction to the game, dice, cards, and a 32p book of props (maps, illustrations, players information). The cover and book artwork is colourful and exotic, indicating a range of scenes that will appear. The content is well-organised, albeit with minimal contents, no index, and with some clarity in the Adventure Book of page number and section. The text is two-column justified with a serif font with an additional middle-column for the well-executed contextual line artwork of characters and items. The writing is informal but clear, and consistently friendly.

Notice something? No rulebook. The box is also emblazoned "Instant Adventure". The opening lines of the introduction: "If you've ever played role-playing games before, you'll soon discover this one is very different." They're not kidding. But let's start with all the traditional RPG components that exist in Sandman, which are pretty much all contained in the 8-page Introduction to the game. Each rule is a couple of paragraphs, and there's 29 of them. The first rule is a statement than game fun has priority over the rules.

Explicitly stated, there's a Storyteller (for the GM), there are player characters, and there are non-player characters. Some actions automatically succeed. There is percentile chances of success ("standard" and "reduced" determined by die rolls with modifiers. There is a quality of success (Q-chance), based on how successful the chance roll was. There's tactical time (5 seconds) for fights and chases, there's rolled initiative, there are wounds and of different types (critical, heavy, medium, light, scratch), which are also used for Q-chance skills. There is even Award Points, given out at the end of each session. These can be used to buy or upgrade Skills. Note there is no attributes either; just skills. Not so strange in contemporary game design, seriously unusual back then.
Curious Adventures

The Adventure Book is the meat and potatoes of the game. As mentioned there are four adventures ('The Sandman Comes', 'Prophet of Darkness', 'A Feast for the Eyes', and 'The Map of Halaal'). Each adventure is explicitly described as a being like a script for a play, and broken up into acts and scenes. In 2017 this is hardly unusual; in 1985 it was seriously innovative. Another unusual aspect of the game at the time is that all PCs start off with a high degree of amnesia. Unlike other games there is no traditional character sheet - just a sheet of equipment; in the course of the game by attempting actions they may be provided skill cards as the discover who they are.

One of the aspects of strict narrative games is the remark that they 'run on rails'. The game does emphasize that improvisation is necessary, and seriously off-plot improvisation, but essentially this is a radical departure from the 'sandbox' model which was dominant, if not exclusively so, at the time. The props for the GM even given a step-by-step pictogram of how events should occur. In the plot, there are various clues and constraints inserted to keep the PCs from straying. Avoiding a sense of contrivance and keeping the narrative flowing is the GM's greatest challenge.

Appropriately, the opening scenario does start on a train and unless the PCs are incredibly dim, nothing is given away by explaining that they are on their way to Mooroco during WWII. Aficionados of the movie 'Casablanca' will be utterly delighted at the numerous characters and scene references that follow, but there are also opportunities for temporal distortions, offering tantalising hints for what will follow. Without giving too much away, it quickly becomes apparent that this is very much a multigenre setting, almost dreamlike in its capacity to change its locations and internal laws. The hint is in the title.

Flawed Genius

The main problem is that the scenarios are one of flawed genius. Partially dreamlike, and partially derivative from fiction (the touch of Poe in particular was appreciated), making an all-mighty mashup, and like most mash-ups it often comes across like a funhouse mirror hall. As evident in a reading, and in actual play, much of the narrative is linear and there are numerous points where the (in)ability of the PCs to act against a perceived antagonist comes across as entirely arbitrary. But this is not all, the game system, as simple as it is, and with hefty levels of hand-waving of individual differences, also is unnecessarily complex with the multicolumn Q-chance table. In addition, the scenarios (and therefore the game) are only designed for one to three players and the Storyteller, and there's scant information what to do if you have more people who want to play. Finally, it must be acknowledged that this product, as it is written, only the first four adventures are provided with the game; there were plans to produce several more boxed sets.
but of course, this never happened.

Nevertheless, there is a lot to be impressed at with Sandman: Map of Halaal, especially in consideration of when it was produced. It really cut some new ground at the time in terms of design (highly simplified rules, narrative scenarios rather than sandbox) and, to be fair, the physical components are of a reasonably good quality as well for the period. Overall the game is recommended, with the warnings provided - the Storyteller will want to go through the scenarios and give some serious consideration on how to give the PCs a greater sense of freedom and, as a clever product once stated, avoid a sense of contrivance.

Style: \[1 + 0.6 \text{(layout)} + 0.6 \text{(art)} + 0.3 \text{(coolness)} + 0.6 \text{(readbility)} + 0.5 \text{(product)} = 2.6\]

Substance: \[1 + 0.3 \text{(content)} + 0.6 \text{(text)} + 0.5 \text{(fun)} + 0.3 \text{(workmanship)} + 0.3 \text{(system)} = 3.0\]

**Amber Diceless Roleplaying (1991)**

**Introduction and Physical Product**

Amber Diceless Roleplaying, as the name suggests, is a RPG system set in Roger Zelazny's 'Amber' and 'Merlin' series of science fantasy novels. The author comes with a design pedigree of some note as the designer of the Teenaged Mutant Ninja Turtles RPG, Revised and Advanced RECON, and Ninjas and Superspies, all by Palladium. Of course, the second half of the title also expresses something quite interesting (and very much so in 1991) that it is diceless roleplaying - but that's not all, as the back-cover blurb explains, the game also comes with an attribute auction system where the PCs are also in competition with each other, setting the scene for what may very well be some in-group conflicts.

As for the product itself (this is the 1992 second printing being considered), it's a 256 page softback with a two-column serif justified font. There's a two-page table of contents and a four-page index, along with a character sheet and worksheet. There's no chapters as such, but rather five major sections; Player Section, A Gamemaster's Guide To The Rules of Diceless Combat (yes, that is the title), Gamemaster Section, Elder Amberites, and Scenarios & Campaigns. There is numerous subsections and sometimes sub-sub-sections, and the effect as a whole can be rather hard going. The subsections are helpfully used to title each page. The colour cover
art by Stephen Hickman is a work of evocative beauty, whilst the interior black and white shaded illustrations by Michael Kucharski are competent and mostly contextual. The writing is a fascinating adventure in its own right, sometimes verbose on its explanation, especially the numerous and necessary examples of play, and then on occasion dense and informal.

**Character Generation**

There are four attributes in Amber; Psyche, Strength, Endurance, and Warfare, which combine both attribute and a range of abilities; characters can have any skills they want if it's part of their backstory. Characters are given ranks (1st, 2nd, 3rd) within the group and numerical values (e.g., -25 for a normal human). All players start with 100 points to bid in a competitive manner against the other players in the group; once these points are bid they are gone. Any points left over are also used to buy powers and extras. The game designer himself explicitly recommends in character generation that you'll want to have 50 points to purchase the Pattern Imprint. The ranked results set up the ranked requirements for future point expenditure, and the first-ranked character is unbeatable in that attribute.

Everyone by default (no bid) receives 'Amber rank' in the attributes, but they can get more points by buying down their rank to Chaos level or even Human level (although the designer recommends against this). The player can also get more points by taking up a numerical value of 'Bad Stuff' for their character (or, conversely spending for "Good Stuff") which will affect the character whenever there is an element of luck or colour. Another source of points is making commitments that contribute to the game, for example, keeping a campaign log and diary. Other things a character can spend points include powers include a variety of magical powers (Imprint, Logrus, Shape-shifting etc), special items or creatures, Shadows, allies, etc. Each of these, as should be expected, are described in some detail (quite a lot, actually) and, of course, are firmly based on the Amber series.

**Combat and Other Mechanics**

A description of the combat system starts with the basic rule that the character with the highest rank in the particular combat will win. It is primarily an exercise in narration with the recommended level of detail depending on the relative ability of the characters involved in the conflict and the narrative tension. If a character is at a worse rank than their opponent, they will lose, simple as that. However, the if they cheat, use some other power or ability, there is a chance that they will win. Basic character combative stances are offensive, opportunistic, or defensive, which in narrative terms will determine how quickly the combat takes, to gauge the ability of the opponent in a time-consuming fashion, or protect oneself from damage (for example, going offensive to someone who is better at Warfare will lead to a rapid defeat; doing so against a significantly weaker opponent finishes the conflict quickly in your favour). Similar sort of descriptive elaboration is provided for a range of other maneuvers.

The same sort of thing applies for other Game Master Mechanics, as the section is titled. In general, if the characters try to do something, it succeeds. However, if they're trying to do something special, they have to either use their powers if it explicitly lists the ability, or negotiate their way with the GM to justify why they could use the power. Again, there is a collection of examples of the use of powers and other abilities, both successful and not, plus a system for designing new powers and the point cost.

**Story Construction, Amber Characters, and Scenarios**

There is a handy, if somewhat short, section on 'A Game Master's Guide to Campaign Construction', which gives an account to sectional story composition, story hooks, character development, closure, and moral resolution. In addition, there is a lengthier section on mining the 'Chronicles of Amber' for various story ideas, especially with detail about various setting locations (e.g., Castle Amber), events (e.g., Corwin's New Pattern), or items (e.g., The Crown of Amber). This is followed about applying overall story arcs (the bigger the better) and making the player characters personally responsible to the outcome as protagonists of the story. Finally there is some rules for gradual character advancement, noting the significant effects of the original rankings as bid.

The Amber characters is a collection of some twenty elder Amberites in alphabetical order and in some detail. Multiple versions of some characters is offered to reflect differing levels of character development in the series, along with personality notes. Also offered are various allies (e.g., Agents of Benedict), items, and creatures - just like the PCs, but
of course with somewhat more points. Evocative quotes relating to the characters in question adds to the personality exposition. In addition to this there is a handy common personality guide to the murderous, Machiavellian, and unapologetic Amberites. In the style of the game, if the GM is playing a character that is smarter than they are (as is the case with all Amberites) - they gain the advantage of being able to cheat.

There is an excellent short chapter on Game Master Technique, which outline hints for character backgrounds, the rules of engagement for character information, choices, and narrative elements. As a perhaps surprising conclusion the designer claims that the book can be thrown away: "the best kind of roleplaying is pure role-playing. No rules, no points, and no mechanics." It's interesting advice, but does sit a little oddly with handily provided sample scenarios; the Throne War which is competitive scenario to become the King of Amber, an investigative and combative scenario with Battleground in Shadow Earth, and finally The Power of the Abyss, a search and rescue mission of major characters in a dangerous environment.

Overall

Whilst the physical product is pretty average, the layout and textual organisation and presentation substandard, there does provide a rather excellent summary of pure storytelling in the Amber setting. It is evident, indeed clearly stated, that this is the designer's preferred point of view. So whilst this useful for roleplaying, the use of a system and mechanics is the framework that converts it into a roleplaying *game*. Only in a very limited sense does Amber do this; there is the bidding system, limits on sample powers etc, and comparative methods for determining relative abilities.

The problem is that "diceless" should not mean "systemless" - and whilst Amber does have a system of sorts, it is much less than what is needed, making the game very much a case of 'Mother, may I?' and indeed, player bullying methods to achieve a desired end. It doesn't have to be like this of course - differences in attributes could provide a strong systemic method of comparison, or of health levels and such forth, that could have been combined into a game system. Indeed, with the book this size such detail is expected. As it is, playing Amber has it's greatest interest in a setting with almost free-form discovery. Perhaps not in the manner intended, the designer's express goal of "Ultimately, I hope you can toss this book", is actually quite true.

Style: 1 + .3 (layout) + .6 (art) + .7 (coolness) + .4 (readbility) + .5 (product) = 3.5

Substance: 1 + .4 (content) + .4 (text) + .5 (fun) + .3 (workmanship) + .1 (system) = 2.7

Deluxe Hero Wars : Epic Roleplaying in Mythic Glorantha (2000)

Physical Product and Description

Hero Wars is, of course, the first incarnation of what would become HeroQuest, the long promised RPG that made it's first tantalising hints in RuneQuest advertising material in the early 1980s. It was certainly a long-time coming, and what was provided was clearly gem in rough whose influences in future editions and other contemporary RPGs will be evident. As the name indicates, this game is set in Glorantha a mythological world that operates with its own symbolic rather than physical laws.

The solid slimline box features an excellent cover art by Lee Moyer of gods (storm and lunar, naturally) in conflict (the internal art, whilst creative and usually contextual, sometimes has a few technique issues). Inside the reason for the weight is evident; three A5 books, one entitle "Hero Wars : Roleplaying in Glorantha" (256p), "Narrator's Book" (176p), and "Gloranthan Visions" (112p). an A4 booklet (56p) of character sheets, glossary, rules summary, and sample character groups, plus an A4 sheet with a map of Glorantha and Dragon Pass. The booklet is an extremely useful addition to the books which were sold separately.

The initial problems of the game are quickly evident. Despite the size of the texts and the density of the content, the table of contents for each book is quite minimal and there is no index, a horrific design error. There is also some evident translation errors between word processors in different operating systems that made it to print; dot points being indicated as question marks, for example. The A4 format is somewhat unwieldy for a fairly rules-intensive game, and
the binding is not exactly strong.

**Character Generation, Game System, and Magic**

Character generation is either by composing a 100-word paragraph from which keywords and abilities can be derived, a list of from which the same can be derived, or it can made up during actual play. Ratings are assigned keywords and abilities. Keywords are major and common features of all characters, and include their culture, occupation, and magic, with assigned values of 13, 17, and 17 respectively. For other abilities the ratings are 13, except for the character's best ability which is at 25, noted as 5W, with the W standing for a 'mastery' level, and one at 1W. Abilities mean skills, combat styles, knowledges, personality traits, relationships, wealth, equiment etc. Magic is defined as theist, sorcery, animist, or mystic. Plenty of examples - taking up some 70 pages in total - of character keyword combinations are provided for the setting. Values can be improved, at a variable cost according to power and relationship to the story, with Hero Points which are assigned at the end of the session by the Narrator.

The basic game system is contested, augmented (from other abilities) and modified (by circumstances) roll-under d20 rolls, with a '1' representing a critical success and a '20' a critical failure. Relative successes are cross-referenced to determine the outcome, the degree of success or failure between the contestants, with consequences ranging from the loser being dazed and confused to being unconscious and dying. A mastery provides a 'bump' in a result (e.g., from success to critical), and multiple masteries can bump the results even further. The system has the advantage of being able to compare any two abilities against each other (albeit with improvisation modifiers as appropriate) and being able to scale from normal humans to demigods and beyond. In addition to these simple contests, there are also extended contests with a bidding and action point system. Both simple and extended contests can be used by groups as well as individuals. It's a great system, although some of the implementations (e.g., values for edges and hindrances) could do with a pretty thorough review.

In addition to the aforementioned magic systems of Theism, Sorcery, Animism, and Mysticism, there is also Basic
magic, the features common to all regardless of their magic tradition. These features indicate symmetry between the different traditions; the Gods of Theism have affinities, providing their worshippers Feats. Sorcery has written instructions in Grimoires, providing individual Spells. Animism has Traditions that allows for the contact of Spirits. Mysticism has Paths of enlightenment, providing the scholars Powers. Theists engage in sacrifice, sorcerers in veneration, shaman in ecstatic worship, and mystics in asceticism, and etc. Each systems of magic has its own plane of power (e.g., Godplane, Spiritplane etc), although the Mystics view the unification as more important. There is difficulty options for increasing the power and scope of magic and, like other abilities, the prospect of community involvement to augment abilities.

Narration and Glorantha

The Narrator's Book starts with a short chapter on narrating the game, with an emphasis on the expression of tense, as results are determined after description, and the traditional staged narrative for episodes. There is a substantial chapter entitled 'Otherworldly Magic', but more about how to access different Gloranthan planes, what they look and feel like, the effects of abilities in an alien environment, and the carrying out of heroquests, usually to gain the most powerful magics and abilities, but sometimes to gain hidden knowledges or even to alter mundane reality itself. As with other abilities, community support is extremely important, and usually heroquests are for the benefit of the community. A sample "minor" heroquest is provided, with each of the nine stations described in detail. The following chapter, appropriately, is on Relationships - to one's familty, community, religion, etc. Several example organisations (Hero Bands) are provided.

Delving further into Glorantha-specific material is a chapter on Creatures, a sort of mini-bestairy, providing some fifty descriptions of natural, magical, chaotic, and elder species along with their major abilities, although there is some remarkable scaling implementation issues with the poor horse only being given a Strength of 2W and its kick only worth a +1 edge! This is followed by a brief description of Glorantha, its history, and current regions, plus several sample scenarios which can be combined into a single scenario; a personal favourite is The Food Thief where the PCs do get the opportunity to meet a rather different God, albeit a minor one. This is all supplemented by the Gloranthan Visions book, not a rulebook as such, but rather a number of short stories and myths, both contemporary (in Gloranthan time) and mythical, and even in one case with the same story told twice but from different cultic perspectives.

Overall

It was certainly a challenging product when released with its emphasis on narrative, community, and open descriptors for abilities. Certainly it confused many people from the Glorantha RPG community who were more used to the detailed, step-wise, simulationism which RuneQuest was famous for. This was certainly a very different sort of game, but one which included some superb innovations. The ability system, where everything is treated as an equivalent value for the purpose of narrative input, was a part of what had become a growing trend for consistency in mechanics. The fact that this scaled was a moment of brilliance; a game could be played with normal humans, the most skilled characters, demigods and beyond. However, as a couple of examples in the review suggestion, much greater attention to implementation of the system is necessary.

The worst part of the books is the overall presentation and layout. The lack of an index is extremely frustrating, although somewhat alleviated by the rules summary and glossary provided in the Deluxe edition. None of this is helped by the trade paperback format. It desperately needs a rewrite and revision and of course that is exactly what happened with two subsequent editions of HeroQuest being released. Overall however, this did represent a first and major redirection in roleplaying with a system to support a new style of play.

Style: 1 + .1 (layout) + .5 (art) + .9 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .3 (product) = 3.5
Substance: 1 + .8 (content) + .7 (text) + .8 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 4.5

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Krononauts: An Example of Multi-Referee Campaign Design

by Lev Lafayette, Karl Brown, Michael Cole

Introduction

In April 2009 we initiated the GURPS Krononauts campaign, part of which has been reviewed in previous issue of RPG Review (Issue 5, September 2009 p29-31., Issue 10, December 2010, p36-40, Issue 11, March 2011). Whilst that article provided a bit of background setting and a few game-system technologies and transhuman species, this article is more about how we managed the game, the story, and actual play, and with a sense of a logical sequence. Quite an achievement given that multiple referees ran the adventures and time travel frequently occurred. The game itself ran from April 2009 to September 2011, with a genuine sense of having completed a story and with the possibility of further developments. This information thus provides a good example for others on how to initiate a successful campaign of a similar nature.

The Initial Consensus

Achieving a consensus among one’s regular gaming group when starting a new collaborative story is essential. In this situation we discussed the ideas among the potential GMs and players to at least ensure that the everyone was satisfied with the ideas and compromises that came into development. In “Big Model” terms, this is the “social contract” the expectations the most obvious being “We shall meet every second Sunday from 2pm to around 6.30pm at this particular location to play our game”. As a relatively mature group who had spent a fair bit of time with each other’s company in the past we also had some implicit expectations of behaviour, which covers some pretty basic ideas of interaction between people and specific expectations of the location (e.g., everyone contributing a ‘shared plate’ of various drinks and foodstuffs for the group).

You may think that behavioural norms shouldn't really need to be stated up-front, but nevertheless sufficient evidence exists that when recruiting new players that it is a good idea, especially from the public at large. One of us, Karl has extensive experience running public games in his experience this setting the tone and expectations is crucial when playing with strangers. If players are recruited as a friend of an existing player, that is usually a good screening process. An advertisement for a random stranger may require a note. Something along the lines of : “This a mature, tolerant, and civil group. Players who have homphobic, racist, bigoted, or misogynistic etc views are advised to go elsewhere” will act as a screening process in its own right. Similarly, assigning a Movie rating to the game, e.g. PG16+ or M, is a great way to communicate many expectations. The discussion should also include the likelihood and expected frequency of PC death. Comments about food and drinks, whether alcohol is OK, etc should also be stated up-front (we didn't mind a few drinks around the table, and we typically had something approaching an canapé feast).

The Setting and the Story

The next step was determining what game we were going to play and for how long. The objective here is to achieve at least a degree of satisfaction among everyone. There was a shared interest among everyone for a story based around historical fiction, partially from successful experiences with games of that genre. There is, of course, an enormous amount of potential settings that could chosen from that perspective, so a decision was made to adopt a time-traveller campaign which allowed for a variety of locations and times to be incorporated.
A different twist that we adopted was to have rotating GMs for the story. Based on successful experiments in the past with fantasy games (a number of AD&D fantasy Europe games being prominent), we understood that it is possible for multiple GMs to manage a campaign. It does require each to have their own sense of the storyline, and to relegate their own characters as NPCs managed by another player when they are acting as GM. Initially, we were going to have just a single GM (Michael), but Karl and Lev (also regular GMs in the group) really wanted to contribute as well. The several other players were happy with this arrangement, so a multi-GM approach was started. With a campaign mailing-list, each fortnight there was flurry of activity discussing and ratifying new rules and effects.

From the outset we 'baked in' key motivators for the players and their characters into the power-level of the PC protagonists and a starting location. Again this is something that requires a fair bit of buy-in from all participants. Obviously there is a great variety of opportunity here. We wanted to give it a bit of a gritty, cutting-edge feel, so we adopted a near-future setting and made the characters personally powerful but politically isolated rebels (like the 1980s TV series, "Blake's Seven") which works well to keep everyone on their toes. In the early stages of the campaign a potted "world history" was developed, which drew heavily on the extensively researched 'future history' developed by Karl for and earlier campaign (The Colony). Knowing what materials and resources GMs have available can significantly reduce preparation time. We dropped initial considerations of aliens, Terminator-style cyborgs etc. The future the PCs called home was a logical extension of current trends. While not a utopia, progress social and technological made the world a pretty nice place to live for most of its inhabitants. Maintaining this status quo by preventing changes to history was a key motivator. GURPS Space provided an excellent guide to the process of creating a future world.

Time travel is notoriously difficult to handle in an RPG. With numerous GMs providing opportunities to mess up history this problem could have been amplified without thorough discussion and careful design by the group. GURPS Time Travel was an excellent guide to the questions to be considered when developing time travel technology for a game. We needed to know as a core technology, a kicker, on how was time-travel achieved (a short-term quantum tunnelling effect was chosen, conversion of mass into photons) and stolen technologies (an artificial intelligence and a time machine). The question of what to do about the future was raised - we adopted a 'backwards-only' approach, where the future was unseatable, but the past could be changed, with consequences for the 'present', rather like a giant elastic band. This has the additional advantage that each scenario would have it's own "time-limit" (not sure what you mean here Lev please elaborate). A key feature to prevent player confusion was that once a person or object had travelled through time they and their memories were unaffected by future changes to the timeline. When the enemy changed history the PCs experienced a sudden change in their surroundings, which non-time travellers did not notice because these NPCs memories were changed. This feature removed the need to 'info-dump' an explanation of changes to the history and memories of the PCs when the timeline was altered.

This was contravened once, when a particular scenario had history change for the better, and all but one of the PCs (and some NPCs) affected. We thus had one PC trying to make the world a worse place, and trying to convince the rest of the PCs that "worse was original". This was accomplished by providing all players except the "anchored" one with a short summary of changes - thankfully all players fully bought in to this. Most scenarios began with a sudden change to the world followed by investigations to determine when the timeline was altered. Additionally, 'tachyon radiation' would prevent PCs meeting themselves, and the machine sent and received everything within a three metre diameter sphere.

There was the question of non-human or para-human species - with the adoption a small selection of uplifted animals (Karl's raven became a major PC), and with psychic experiments allowing for psionics in the game (c.f., The Tomorrow People). The latter was a matter of some dispute (Karl opined: "if you're going to have Psi you may as well have magic"), so we kept it very low-powered and rare, but also critical for operating the time-machine (c.f., Norman Spinrad's "Riding the Torch"). It also ensured that the psionic character had to be protected, and, following an influence from the 1980s comic series “New Statesmen” - and also present in “Eclipse Phase” - psionic characters had a shortened lifespan and were prone to mental disorders.
Initially, it was though that the game would run for about a year, with the multiple GMs operating for one or two sessions at a time with episodic storytelling, rather like Dr. Who or Torchwood. This changed as time went on with a more complete and interventionist narrative emerging from the episodes themselves. As for running for a year, that certainly wasn’t the case. Nevertheless it was a pretty tight ship - it is always good every six months or so when running a long-term campaign to get a sense from the rest of the players how far in the future they wish to continue playing in that particular story.

Game System and House Rules

When it came to the game-system there was some very quick general agreement. Note that this should come after the "social contract" and story components, but in this matter there was little disagreement among the group. GURPS was very well known among all participants (third edition, revised in particular) and the game system already had an extensive line of sourcebooks that were especially well suited for a time-travel campaign, with GURPS Biotech, Psionics, Cyberpunk, Ultratech (I and II), High Tech, Time Travel, and Space being 'core rules'. Because we had already decided the general setting it was relatively easy to pick a Tech Level, with TL9 adopted; any higher and the technology starts getting a little too strange, any lower and it's too close to contemporary technology. Likewise we were also able to provide players a character base level at 200 points which emphasized the idea of their personal power, but also with recommended disadvantages to spur the campaign.

Other game systems were given passing consideration: as another generic system d20 and its various supplements was rejected by all three GMs. The Rolemaster/Spacemaster supplement contributed to a small extent especially with its ideas of the "true timeline" and the prospect of antagonistic "revisionists". An RPG from the 1980s, TimeMaster from Pacesetter, provided a fine collection of source material. Whilst not a great game itself as a whole, it did have *great* concept system where the character's actions change history based on deviation from the historical norm. e.g., when travelling with Ulysses, if you fail to get him home properly all of Greek civilisation is lost because this is the founding myth of the Greeks as a settled people who employ reason to solve problems.

The introduction of various houserules and especially rules elaborations required agreement from all GMs. In general a policy was encouraged to use existing rules and re-fit them for new circumstances rather than develop a new rules set. Karl provided a species template for the uplifted Ravens along with a bird-air-bike ("you've got legs but you don't walk to the shops, why should I flap my own wings like a sucker?") and other designs using GURPS Vehicles and GURPS Robots. Lev adopted the GURPS Space radiation poisoning rules for tachyon radiation sickness based on the Observer Effect, for when two versions of the same character are in close proximity (resulting in a great scene where a character watched themselves die).

As a major item of equipment, the time-machine itself had limitations built into its functioning such as an effective limiting "bubble" of 3m diameter which allowed for small number of characters and goods to be transported.
It also meant that PCs had a requirement to clean-up after themselves! These deliberate limitations on character action prevent the story from going off-the-rails because of the introduction of a super-technology, they keep the players attentive, and provide potential plot devices ("...We leave behind a crater in the floor of St Peter's and half an elephant. Air rushes in to fill the void."). Other limits included the bulk of the machine, a recharge time, nausea and vertigo on arrival, and the need to be able to visualise your destination.

**The Emergent Narrative**

Every campaign should start with a really solid introduction and real-spur to action for the PCs. Already we had placed the characters as powerful rebels with stolen technology. To give a further sense of being "on the lam" they started in an location that was both isolated and exotic - an abandoned nuclear-powered lighthouse off the north coast of Russia, and this case specifically Archangel - which provided a great name for the artificial intelligence helping the PCs, as well as a power source for the AI and the time-machine.

![Image from http://englishrussia.com](http://englishrussia.com)

Despite a strong kicker in the terms of the initial situation, early scenarios were very much exploratory. The notion of ‘time travelling’ itself was sufficiently exotic in its own right and the characters and locations only required a minimal level of connection. Nevertheless they included various "turning points in history", such as a journey to the fall of the Aztec Empire, prehistoric locations such as Doggerland in the last glacial period, the super-heated starless 'Dark Age' just after the Big Bang, and even literary examples involving a meeting with Edgar Allan Poe (the raven made a slight change to the famous poem) along with some of his creations (c.f., "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"). A rather challenging change occurred when the computer went mad, with the PCs tracing the cause to a line in Diderot's "Le rêve de D'Alembert"; a journey back to pre-revolutionary France discovers a group that had actually improved the world - but that would be revisionism. On more than a few occasions the krononauts found themselves having to deal with multiple alternate timelines.

Eventually major plot influences were introduced. The main antagonist group in the story, the corporation which developed time-travel and conducted child psionic experiments to enrich themselves turned out not to have just purely mercenary motivations, but neo-Nazi influence. After the PCs base was discovered by the company, a new home had to established, a bunker in the former Soviet testing site of Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan. And what's worse than regular Nazis? Time-travelling neo-Nazis! As can be expected this resulted in several adventures located both in the contemporary setting and in the Second World War itself. Werner Von Braun's Nazi rocket factory and several PCs were vapourised several times by a time travelling nuke before the players finally figured out how to stop it!

Michael introduced some superb and surprising plot elements, including the return of Montezuma as a music producer, and rescuing Angela Merkel's mother, Herlind Jentzsch (who having discovered that her saviours were organised by a character known as "Archangel" said that she would name a child after them). But none topped the idea of putting a time-machine inside the time-machine and the paradoxes that created.

Whilst these were all excellent, mind-bending, and exotic scenarios the point in this context is not so much the
scenarios themselves, but how we were able to put them altogether. Eventually, as one may assume, the good guys won. However the experience of open communication among all players of the game system modifications, alternate history, theoretical foundations of time travel, etc added to the experience of developing the story. An ever-expanding "worldbook" of information was compiled by Karl, representing canonical information of the setting and system. Despite having rotating GMs, consistent character behaviour was generated by the NPCs (aided by the game system which encourages this, and of course, historical evidence and contexts), and individual character developments were able to surprise all - even those who were involved in the trio of rotating GMs.

One of the best aspects of the rotating GMs was the ability to play off each other - to take ideas that another GM came up with or aspects that they introduced, and run with it. The previously mentioned Montezuma was first introduced by Lev in a jaunt back to Aztec Mexico when the conquistadors invaded. After one of the PCs to a liking to him and rescued him from certain death by bringing him back to the future, he sought of disappeared from the story. Until Michael decided to reintroduce him in a later adventure in the current time, much to the surprise of some of the players.

We also revisited adventure locations - as mentioned, the continual revisiting of Germany during WWII was due to much being unresolved in previous adventures or previous adventures leaving loose ends that needed to be tied up. We also had the weirdness of going back in time to affect the outcome of going back in time.

**Concluding Remarks**

The Krononauts campaign started with establishing a social contract of play and implicit behaviour norms that satisfied all participants in the game. From there it was a matter of including all participants in the development of the background, and game system but retaining sufficient elements of surprise in the story development itself as entertainment. The development of the narrative from exploratory to emergent allowed for individual scenarios to have their own plot arcs, whilst contributing to a greater plot arc for the entire campaign.

Certainly there were disagreements on background, history, technological trajectories, the nature of time-travel etc - however these were not only thrashed out out-of-game, there was an agreement between the GMs that the various game elements that were still under dispute were not resolved in a particular story. Thus, nobody had a game definition enforced on them that they still had an issue with.

Krononauts was an especially rich collaborative story experience because of all these meta-management features as well as the ability for players to introduce different creative agendas at different points in the game. As in the real world, no single person involved knew everything that was going on. Finally, the selection of the setting itself allowed a diverse range of people to engage in exploration of specialist topics that they had a special interest in. Everyone was involved to the extent that they wanted to be and on the issues that they wanted to explore - and that generated Maximum Game Fun.
On Evil Races

by Levi Kornelsen

Both Tolkien and D+D, the origin points and mainstays of our hobby, as well as many many (many!) of their inheritors, have proposed fictional universes in which some species of intelligent beings are inherently evil. This means, and is often shown to mean, that a war or other forceful action can be both genocidal and just, because it is directed at evil beings. Whatever you think of the trope, it is present.

There are some arguments why this is a bad idea:

1a. Because it normalises to some extent the idea that a race of people can be all one thing, and that thing is bad.

2a. Because, to the extent that it "dresses up" the evil species in a way that resembles any real-world culture (something that's been done on various occasions), it is an insult to that culture.

3a. Because it allegorizes real racial conflict to some extent in a simplistic good-and-evil manner, and then asks you to participate fictionally on a side.

4a. It is aesthetically displeasing to have an "evil race" at all, regardless of harm.

(And more I can't think of, likely).

And there are some defenses for the trope, opposing the above:

1b. That the above noted effects are in practice shown by a deeply tenuous and anecdotal set of evidence; the claim of harm is not well-supported.

2b. In practice, a not-insignificant number of people whose cultures have been used as dress-up for evil races find this amusing or otherwise non-insulting.

3b. The allegory runs the other way; it's the grand struggle of good and evil mythologized into hero and monster-man.

4b. It is aesthetically pleasing and/or awesome to have monster-men.

(And more that I'm forgetting)

And one practical concern:

Xa) It's a convenient trope; it let's you have easily-demarcated enemies without setup. That's an Orc; it's a baddie. Go.

With it's opponent:

Xb) Lazy-ass.

Now, for me personally, I give a bit more weight to the (a) arguments than the (b) arguments. But not so much I deny the presence of the (b) side, or think it's inescapable - I like to drop the word "race", make them not-very-human-at-all, don't dress them up as any specific culture, and forward the cosmic allegory over the racial one where there's some potential for such. When I can't do those things, I aim to drop the "species alignment" entirely, and instead go for evil factions.
RPG Theory, So-Called
by Levi Kornelsen

RPG Theory, So-Called

The three-part mental model of overall playstyles I actually use most in my brain these days looks a specific way. Any relationship between this mutated complex of opinion and its sources is probably weak at best. To imagine this thing, take a triangle and label the corners like this:

1. Situation (Make decisions about this human stuff and change it.)
2. Sandbox (The world around you is like this; do as thou wilt.)
3. Script (This is the plot; play your part like you own it.)

You can be wherever inside that triangle, doing stuff. Here's some stuff you might be doing and seeing...

"Illusionism" is when you pretend you're not running a Script game, but you totally are, you railroading jackass.

Really bored players happen when they expect a script, and you don't have one. Have a talk about all this, or give them one; also, during said talk, being sneery about script games being all railroads because You Had A Bad Experience is probably not helping.

Really aggravating shit goes down when one or more players are all prepped to go sandboxing, and you try to hook them into a situation or script, expecting participation that they had no expectation of giving.

"Narrativism" is when you're running a situation, and the stuff you're making decisions about and changing is stuff that matters in ways intended to lead to storylike stuff, like character development, happening. (This is probably not your definition.)

"Simulation/Emulation" is when you care lots about the stuff in the sandbox/situation/script fitting genre/physics/whatever. Because a Star Wars game that feels like Star Wars is better than one that doesn't, like, obviously. Side note: If your medieval setting represses women and gay folks because "realism", what you're actually doing is emulating the world your stupid fucking preconceptions require.

"Gamism" is when this stuff is not as important as doing awesome shit with rules. This trends towards murdering your way across a sandbox, or riding down along an epic script, or the synthesis where you get scripted from one mini-sandbox (dungeon, usually) to another. This is fucking awesome, if everyone's into it, by the way.

All sorts of rambling nonsense

Let's start with me being a dick about one thing in particular, though.

An impossible thing: To the extent that a game is pre-plotted, you are not in fact "creating a story collaboratively", and anyone who says otherwise is full of crap, selling something, and may be writing the Storyteller advice section for Vampire 1st edition. Also, to the extent that everything matters as much as everything else as in the baseline neutral sandboxy state, you have nothing that matters enough to make a story from; until you have grist to make decisions that matter, that shit isn't "a story" in a meaningful way unless your definition of story stems from Braaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiintmmmmm...Ahem. Therefore, story-making play requires situation-structured bits (even if that situation is embedded in some other wider thing). Also: The simplest form of situation looks a fuck of a lot like a kicker and a bang.
Following that, little situations appear everywhere: As soon as characters start to give a damn about something and need to make people-decisions (as opposed to, say, resource-management or river-navigation ones), you're doing situational stuff. Though it may not last, because the game doesn't necessarily live there.

Also, genre emulation and lots of other things include little choo-choo trains all over: If a trope says "When this happens, then that happens", and you do that thing, guess what? You've got a bunch of little, loosely-defined scripts in your shit. Just like, hey, what basically happens in what order on a dinner-and-a-movie date? If you know that, you know the script. Does your fairy tale game end happily ever after, and did you know which happily ever after it'd be?

Also also, little sandboxes are all over: Because when the characters walk into an open set, like going to the pub, it doesn't matter where they sit unless you're a control freak or already have Special Plans regarding that dude in the corner with the yellow exclamation mark above his head. They get to screw around, decide what's important, use it to say whatever they want. It just doesn't necessarily matter.

So, okay: All the games have all the bits, unless they are truly damned odd. Very few games are a pure thing, even when they're clearly A Thing More Than Another Thing.

Even when you "play to find out what happens," you're playing to find out what happens with regard to some stuff, while totally not doing that with other stuff, because some stuff is focal, and some stuff is boring or otherwise not part of what you meant.

Likewise, when you say "anything could happen in the game", you don't mean that your black ops agent might eat the moon. There are always limits to what you mean there; they're just invisible because you're looking at all the open space between the boundaries, in just the way you should. But sometimes, maybe, acknowledging that all this crap is going on might be good for clarity.

**Systems Handle Things, And Say Things**

When you play, you use some blend of rules / procedures / methods / interpretive auguries / authority structures / dark sweet coffee to resolve and handle various things. That's your system, as Vincent Baker has told you already. Game books, we'll get to in a minute.

Let's talk about what the different game things need:

A Script requires an authority structure, like, saaaaay, a GM, to happen with maximum invisibility and smoothness. When you have a bunch of players all negotiating the script, then they're negotiating as players, not playing and improvising cool bits as their characters. If good script stuff isn't central to your game, you can toss out the GM. Alternatively, the rules structure itself can be the authority that demands and dictates script structure... Okay, lemme let the books back in for a second: See Warhammer Quest, and how it goes with and without GM. Or you can split the authority up in one of a hojillion cunning ways.

A Sandbox has some kinds of stuff that need handling, depending on what kind of sandbox it is, and a place to live (like in the head of a GM or a set of procedural generation rules). Traditionally, we're talking about travel, combat, resources, estates, crafting: largely physical concerns. Focusing on that specific stuff probably isn't an absolute necessity, but it's intuitive, easily visualised, and means you can go GI Joe your way around whilst also planning out your Barbie Dream Home, as one does.

A Situation, in itself, requires relatively little in the way of mechanisms, until it leads to conflicts that can't be roleplayed out. So it needs combat rules, riiight? Except, man, if you want your game to be about the situations, the traditional outputs of combat (injury and death) only provide one kind of juice. So, like, you want there to be more
outputs than that, and it wouldn't be a bad thing if the mechanism also resolved some other stuff, right? From this line of reasoning, you get shit like conflict resolution systems, and other machines that are there to handle whatever comes up and spit dramatic stuff back out again.

So, those are the needs. Let's look at some games, from my viewpoint:

D&D is primarily sandbox material with a GM for scripts; if you want to do situation, you don't really need that fancy shit, right? Cool. The OSR games and the philosophy around them are intensely sandboxy.

Fiasco actively interferes with scripting the whole chain of events beyond the level of one scene at a time (which it supports). It does this because fuck you, you're not supposed to know what happens next, except that it will make more of a mess. You are deep in the situation, not coming on it from outside.

Dogs In The Vineyard sends you at situations full-force from the outside, with authority, and the rules are almost exactly "Conflict with way more outputs".

The World Of Darkness games have long relied on strong GM authority to both put scripts down on a bunch of sandboxy mechanisms, and to push players into situations. And, yes, there's more to it than that, and they've gotten waaaaaaaay more sensible about the recommended methods for doing it over the years, but there's still some tension there.

Fate has some stuff that serves all the corners here and there, which means that if you're driving hard for one corner, you're gonna need to hack. So you do, obviously, because it's easy, and everyone is! Or you can just tool around with all the bits, because the middle of the little Sandbox/Situation/Script triangle is a perfectly fine place to be, as long as you're not bullshitting anyone about it.

Going Totally Off The Rails

Drift! From my view (not quite the standard definition), drift includes both the deliberate and accidental shift of a game from one style of play to another. This especially includes when the game book describes one style and your play is another. So if you grab a sandboxy OSR game and play it in a heavy situational style, or with an epic plot that's strongly scripted, you're drifting that thing.

When you're playing, because there are little sandboxes, scripts, and situations all over (regardless of the overarching style), it is possible for a group to get caught up in one or the other of those little ones and for it to grow. The group can get really into the thing with the Princess and the Captain of the Guard, at which point you're playing situationally, rendering your sandbox or script as background. When this happens, you've changed styles. The group can latch on to a prediction as "that's clearly our overall script", and then run along with their newly-chosen Great Destiny. The group can just decide to fuck around with whatever interest them; they can spend a session going shopping before the ball at the palace where your plans are laid.

You can fight this, totally, in play, cutting it off and disabusing players of the idea if running the game; getting them "back on track". Buuuuuut.....It's often a bad idea to go hard here, because this kind of thing is entertaining and engaging and natural; it's what happens.

You can also exclude this, so that you can predict what play will be about and have the right rules. You do that by moving from scene to scene with a strong hand, and limiting the field of mini-bits down to very few (this is the "focused game" approach common in Forge-inspired circles). And this works, too, and isn't a bad idea; it has the obvious benefit that you're never suddenly playing with the wrong kind of rules, but it can be feel... Artificial? Not sure that's the right word, but a thing like that.
Or you can embrace it. And that is the point where I diverge completely from standard theory prescriptions for game design, so I'm going to make that a separate (possibly last? possibly not?) post in this series.

**What makes a good system design?**

A good game includes system, fiction, and so on; I'm talking system here, and I'm talking in this case specifically from the central point of the engine (how you roll dice and what you do with them, kind of stuff), outward. Quality here, by my view, is a matter of value minus costs. Let's do cost first, because it's easier.

The costs of a given design are actual money, learning time, reference time, prep time, and handling time. Actual money is pretty self-explanatory. Learning time is the time required to internalise the system enough to play the design roughly as described; this includes time teaching it to new players. Reference time is the amount of time spent paging through the books during play for specific rules; this also includes flipping through a four-page character sheet. Prep time is time spent getting scenarios, maps, situations, and such ready. Handling time is the time consumed by actual system use; roll ten dice, count them up, multiply the result by three, and then headdesk.

Each cost is weighted differently, not just generally but by user, to the extent (and with external concerns) that these costs can sometimes flip. A shiny limited-edition book may feel like getting more than your money's worth to one user. Another might enjoy prep if it's presented well, as a kind of solitaire game they get to play with. There's even a form of fun in referencing, if you're regularly discovering rules that engage you of themselves, or which feel emulative in the way you want (like the designer handing you the most Star Warsy solution to your current Star Wars problem).

Now, let's do some value.

A good game has clarity of procedure; it is clear on how you do the things that it requires you to do.

It has cogency of default position; it doesn't need to say where it exists in my little situation/sandbox/script triangle, but it should avoid contradicting itself. A big part of this is that the things it manipulates and tracks with numbers are in keeping with that default position - which includes their level of detail.

The ways the engine and system around it generate new fiction (the outputs of resolution) should also inspire further action. This can be narrow, like "everything is about the hit points because you are in danger; focus on that" or broad, with lots of different outputs that inspire lots of different reactions, but for outputs to be dull is a failing.

A good system prompts decisions. These can be resource-management, tactics, personal, characterisation, whatever suits. In a heavily-scripted game, having small decisions matters more, not less; in a sandboxy game, having resources to manage gives ownership over the stuff of the setting; in a situational game, characterisation by system decisions can be vital.

A good system can be fully focused, OR robust to change (or even better, modular). Ongoing drift happens; if the system doesn't restrain this by focus or can't be adapted when it allows it, it will be the wrong system some of the time.

...
Production

First published by Chaosium in 1978, over the ensuing decades the RuneQuest game has gone through a number of editions with different publishers and licensees. The new edition returns to Chaosium where it started and where, in its heyday, was second only to Dungeons & Dragons in terms of sales.

RQG is built off the chassis of the acclaimed RuneQuest 2nd Edition (1980). This enables RQG to be compatible with RuneQuest Classic, the updated reprints of the RQ2 line which Chaosium recently kickstarted to great success.

Fans had been referring to the new rules variously as 'RQ4' and 'RQ7, but our new game is simply not a layer atop the Avalon Hill edition (RQ3) or the Mongoose variants that came after that. Nor is it built from the version Design Mechanism produced under license (RQ6). So, rather than try to give the new edition a number, calling it ‘RQG’ neatly avoids any confusion.

*RuneQuest: Roleplaying in Glorantha* is scheduled for a Christmas 2017 release.

**RQG WILL NOT BE KICKSTARTED**

The new edition will not be launched with a Kickstarter.

"If we Kickstarted the new RQ, the campaign wouldn't be able to be launched until September at the earliest, and if..."
there had been stretch goals the first books would probably not be out until the middle of 2018", said Meints. "In our new timeline we'll have three RQG titles out by the end of the year, followed by additional items every month or two after that."

The products scheduled for 2017 release are the RuneQuest: Roleplaying in Glorantha core rules, a Gloranthan Bestiary, and a scenarios book featuring adventures by game design legends Steve Perrin (RQ1&2), Ken Rolston (RQ3's 'rune czar', Morrowind, Elder Scrolls), Chris Klug (DragonQuest II, James Bond 007 RPG) and the 'grand shaman of gaming' himself Greg Stafford.

"We are building up a RQ product pipeline that will release 6 products per year, at a pace of a book every other month on average. Big gaps between new product coming out sap the momentum", said Meints. "Kickstarter is a wonderful marketing tool. It has many benefits and advantages. That doesn't mean it's right for every product we produce."

The first new RQG product is the RuneQuest Quickstart, which will be available in June for Free RPG Day and at the Chaosium website from July 1, 2017.

The manuscript for the core rules of RuneQuest has now been passed over to Jason Durall for copy editing! Jason's been informally involved with the design team from the beginning as a sounding board, but now he's taking on a very active role (including correcting any of the many mistakes and errors that may have snuck in as I finalized the draft). He'll also be writing the rules examples based on the ongoing character saga within the book.

So, what's in the final manuscript? The core rules include character creation, homelands, runes, passions, rune magic and cults (I think there are 17 short cult write ups in the core rules, plus 2 spirit cults), spirit magic, new spirit combat rules, new shamanism rules, new sorcery rules (including notes on Malkionism, Aeolianism, and Lhankor Mhy sorcery), wealth and occupation rules, and material on running seasonal campaigns. Plus plenty more.

Right behind the core rules is the Glorantha Bestiary, which has over 60 species statted up, 4 or 5 short cult write-ups (including Kyger Litor, of course), and creating adventurer information for 6+ species (and enough information to wing it with almost all the other Elder Race entries).

The third core RuneQuest book is the Gamemaster Book, which includes HeroQuesting information, rules on Heroes (with a capital H), Chaos, Illumination, more short cult writeups (including the Red Goddess, with brand new Lunar magic), magic items, loads of encounters, and 3 or 4 scenarios (by Chris Klug, Jason Durall, MOB, and myself).

That's a lot of stuff. That's why we've decided to divide the new rules into three books, because that way we could put out everything we wanted to, and keep each book a reasonable length. And for me, I always prefer having a separate Bestiary from the core rules, and although I am a huge fan of having starting scenarios immediately available, I do think they are better not in the "players book".

So I kind of snuck at two bombshells in there, didn't I? First is that the new sorcery system is written. It is NOT that of RQ3 (or even Sandy's sorcery rules). It is much easier and way more Gloranthan than the RQ3 rules. And it will be the likely subject of the next design notes.
But the other bombshell is the new rules for playing or running Heroes in RuneQuest. Heroes gain an increasing presence in the otherworld, which becomes a tremendous source of power, but also requires that the hero be worshiped to maintain it (that worship can be regular or propitiatory). A hero can return from the dead, and can gain other abilities such as unaging as a result of heroquest gifts. Heroes no longer need to be "super-skilled" - their "Hero Soul" and heroquest gifts enables them to do remarkable things, even if their actual skills are in the range of a Rune Lord or Priest.

And that too will likely be the subject of a future design note!

Goals

In approaching the design of the new edition of *RuneQuest*, we had four over-riding goals:

* Set *RuneQuest* firmly in Glorantha.
* Maintain backwards compatibility with *RuneQuest 2* - in particular with the adventure scenarios and campaigns that were rereleased as a result of the highly successful *RuneQuest Classic* Kickstarter in late 2015.
* Bring the Runes directly into the game mechanics - the game is *Rune-Quest* after all! And at the same time, make it more fun to use Rune magic as an initiate: Rune Magic had to be replenishable somehow,
* Provide deeper incentives for character immersion into the setting, to fulfill the promise of Greg's original *Dragon Pass* campaign from the early 1980s. The acclaimed computer game *King of Dragon Pass* provides a rich immersive Gloranthan experience: we want to achieve something as deep as that in the tabletop *RuneQuest* game. The gold standard for doing this is, of course, *Pendragon*, a rules system that has strongly influenced my approach to game design and play.

The first was a no-brainer. *The Guide to Glorantha* won the 2015 Diana Jones Award and by popular demand is going to be reprinted later this year. Sandy Petersen's *Gods War* will be Kickstarted in May and Chris Klug is working on an updated version of *Dragon Pass* for later this year as well. 2016 is shaping up to the be the Year of Glorantha, and *RuneQuest* needs to be part of that!

The second goal was a result of the Kickstarter for *RuneQuest 2*. Over 2000 people backed *RuneQuest 2*, and even more importantly, get a swathe of classic supplements back into print, including *Apple Lane, Snake Pipe Hollow, Cults of Prax, Cults of Terror, Pavis, Big Rubble, Borderlands, Griffin Mountain, and Trollpak*. All of sudden *RuneQuest 2* is not only back in print, but it just became a major product line!

It was the third goal that really consummed my thoughts leading the design team. I knew the Runes had to both be tied to Rune Magic and drive the character's personality (like personality traits do in *Pendragon*), but coming up with an elegant mechanic that reinforced the themes and conceits of the setting was elusive. We kept coming up with a variation of *HeroQuest* Glorantha's three-run solution, and it just didn't fit *RuneQuest*.

Then I had inspiration! Rather than put just three Runes on the character sheet - why not use all the relevant Runes?
The elemental wheel from Zzabur's Sigil would work for the elemental Runes - and a character could be composed from more than one element! Furthermore, a character's driving Rune might change as the character develops.

As for the Power Runes, Ken Rolston pointed out that they were dualistic personality traits - and as a result, could serve the same role as personality traits do in Pendragon. We could have four opposing pairs, plus add Man and Beast to provide a civilized versus wilderness pairing. It also would make Rune magic far easier to retool (while still keeping all the Rune spell we all love).

A series of long, feverish emails later, and we had the Runes and how they related to the character! And we also had a new engine for Rune magic, but that will have to wait until a later post...

System

As we started to develop the design goals of the new RuneQuest, Ken Rolston, Chris Klug, and I had a discussion about "what are the key features of RQ"? Here are some of the conclusions (in no particular order):

Percentage Skills Character Sheet

RuneQuest is Awesome and Elegant because of its percentage skills character sheet. For NON-COMBAT roleplaying, it has no peers, because the player looks at their character sheet, finds an ability, and rolls against it. A super-simple system for non-combat RPG conflict resolution.

The RuneQuest percentage skills character sheet elegantly serves non-combat roleplaying through these two important design rules:

* RPG Design Rule a: "If it's not in the rules, it's not in the gameplay." [ie, player knows it's not an important thing to think about]

* RPG Design Rule b: "If, in a scenario crisis, a player can't find problem-solving tools on their character sheet, they won't look elsewhere for them." [ie, When players are flummoxed, they look to their character sheets for inspiration. And they won't be inspired to use any tool they don't find there.]

For COMBAT resolution, everything is present on the character sheet. Strike rank for character and weapon, weapon damage, hit points, armor points, magic points, spells, etc - all there. The rest can be intuitively handled: "I want to shoot at the sentry from behind while he doesn't know I am there - do I get a bonus?" or "I want to push the dark troll backwards over the cliff by rushing her" and so on. These additional rules need to be easy and intuitive. And importantly, the player doesn't need to know the rule in order to suggest it.

RQ combat is deadly and relatively quick. It uses hit locations, and there's a rapid resolution once a character either gets really lucky (a critical hit!) or really unlucky (a fumble! I'm boned!) Limbs HAVE to be hacked off, weapons need to get impaled and stuck in the enemy. RQ combat ideally ends within 3-4 rounds because one of the opponents SHOULD
be dead or incapacitated within that time.

RQ combat is deliciously realistic and immersive - which is why RQ combat should be about AVOIDING combat, where possible. Unless PCs are ambushing. And if ambushed, they should be running away!

RQ Combat also needs to be simple. The more detailed the combat system becomes - the more a tactical wargame experience it becomes, and the more likely it is to bog down under its own weight. RQ has a pace to combat: Attack, Parry, Attack, Parry, CRITICAL HIT - limb severed! Or: Attack, Parry, Attack, Parry, Attack, FUMBLE - shield thrown away and limb severed!

As the characters improve in skill, that pacing extends (as they only miss on a 95%). However, as they improve in skill, they should be also increasing their devotion to their cult and getting more and more Rune magic. Thunderbolt does wonders to speed up a combat, as does Truesword, elementals, or Fly. Beyond that, extremely high skilled characters need to be able to be funneled into heroquests, where blasting your way through is rarely a solution - even for a war god.

The 90/10 Rule

For any entry-level product, provide 90% Comfortable and Familiar Content and Experiences and no more than 10% Revolutionary, Distinctive, and Glamourous Innovation. That way, beginners have comfortable jump-starts. And designers put MOST of their narrative and system energy into showcasing the innovations for the intro experience.

Since post the RuneQuest Classic Kickstarter, RQ2 IS the comfortable and familiar content, so that needs to be the base.

So what about RQ3?

RQ3 introduced a level of complexity that most of the writers involved now think was unnecessary, even counter-productive. Fatigue, alterations to armor points, daily (or even hourly) tracking for training and experience, overly complicated Summoning rules (that made it unlikely a player character would actually succeed), badly broken Sorcery Rules (which in the words of one of its writers, "sucked toads"), converting strike ranks into impulses, etc.

RQ2 is viewed as the better core rules system. That's not a nostalgia thing - that's how the actual writers now generally view it. There are plenty of fixes to RQ2 that RQ3 (and various supplements even in the RQ2 period) introduced: more sensible cult hierarchies (not every cult should have rune lords!), and so on. But if we start with RQ2, put in the revisions to RQ2 that had largely been written (if not published) prior to RQ3, we get a very solid starting point to build on.

Source Material

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We started with RQ2. Then looked at documents like Arcane Lords, Greg Stafford's Dragon Pass campaign, as well as published RQ2 supplements (such as Trollpak), to develop a revised RQ2.5. Then we looked at areas where RQ3 did a better job explaining a rule, or had better concepts (for example Ceremony or Enchanting) - and used them. Sandy, Chris, and MOB have revised Shamanism to make it playable. At the same time we built in the Runes and passions and integrated them into the magic system and other mechanics, and looked at such unpublished rules as Epic and Glorantha the Game. And so on.

Right now, we have the newest member of the development team Steve Perrin looking carefully at core combat mechanics to see what room we have for improvement (for example, what is the impact of a special Parry?). So now we are entering into the playtesting stage. The first select teams have already been assembled, and I'm really pleased with the critical feedback so far! We'll be casting out a wider net soon after.

_Rune Magic_

As we've said before, a key goal of the new RuneQuest is to tie the mechanics into the setting of Glorantha and incentivize immersion and role-playing.

At the top of the list was fixing Rune Magic, which had quite a few problems. The biggest was that an initiate had to sacrifice points of permanent POW for a specific spell beforehand, and if that spell was cast, it was gone forever. RQ3 introduced the requirement that to get reusable rune magic, you needed to have at least 10 points of Rune spells (as well as various other requirements).

As a result, very few characters ever made it to Rune Priest - which created another problem. Characters with very high skill values in combat tend to stalemate rather than reach a decision. The solution to this was supposed to be that high skill value characters also are likely to be Rune levels with loads of reusable Rune magic - amazing what Thunderbolt, Sever Spirit, Fly, Summon Elemental, etc can do to change the dynamics of a battle! But if becoming a Rune level was simply not likely to happen, then this feature became a bug.

So fixing Rune Magic was a top priority - and actually one of the very first things we built into the new rules.

You might have noticed on the crude draft character sheet in the first installment of my designer notes there was a pentagram with the five Elemental Runes surrounding the moon rune, and something reminiscent of the Tree of Life. It had the the eight Power Runes plus Man and Beast arranged as polarities. Characters now have ratings in all these runes.

For the Elemental Runes (including Moon), the character starts with ratings in three of them (chosen by the player). For example a player might chose Air 60%, Moon 40%, and Fire 20%.

The player also picks two of the polarities for their character to be strong in - which means the rune on the other side of the polarity is correspondingly weak.
For example, the player could choose Death at 75% (with Fertility at 25%) and Beast at 75% (and Man at 25%). The other polarities start at 50/50. HeroQuest and Pendragon players should already be conceptually familiar with this. A character's Runes can improve with experience, training, and research.

Instead of sacrificing points of POW for specific rune spells, a character now sacrifices points of POW for Rune Points (RP) with the god. They can cast ANY rune spell the god offer, up to the number of RPs they've sacrificed. But to cast a spell, they must roll against the corresponding Rune of the spell. That's the chance of success. They then spend the Rune Points; when the RPs run out, then no more Rune spells.

So for example, Vargast has 5 RPs with Orlanth. As battle commences he casts Shield 2, and succeeds by rolling under his Air Rune of 85%. He now has 3 RPs. Vargast is up against a tough foe and can't seem to get past his opponent's ability to parry. So Vargast calls on Orlanth for Thunderbolt. He again succeeds on his Air Rune, expending his last 3 Rune points to blast his opponent for 4D6 damage!

Rune Points replenish through worship. An initiate needs to go to a temple and participate in a worship ceremony to get some RPs back. High Holy Day and Sacred Time ceremonies replenish the most, but most initiates can replenish several RPs each season (depending on what actions the initiates take, how good their Worship skill is, etc). Rune levels get their Rune Points back MUCH faster, and usually replenish them all in full each season.

Now of course, to be good at Rune Magic you want to have strong Rune affinities in the deity's runes. That means that you want to act in a manner corresponding to the Rune - that gets those Rune ratings up high! If you worship Humakt but want to be doing all sorts of Fertility Rune stuff, your magic will suffer. Your choice as a player, but the incentive is to act like the god. And of course, you will want to be returning to your temple for worship to get those RPs back. In other words, the rules provide an incentive to think and behave like a Gloranthan.

What we've found in practice is that players are now much more willing to sacrifice for Rune spells, and use them more often - on what is actually needed for the situation. And there is more interest in becoming a Rune level because players have a taste of what could be done if they can get Rune Points back faster (and also there are other benefits of being a god-talker, Rune Priest, or Rune Lord).

This has made a big impact on combat - physical stalemates become magical battles! Which is just as is described in Greg's Gloranthan stories.

A Few Thoughts on RuneQuest Combat...

Runes combat is a fundamentally different experience than in most other roleplaying games. First, and I think most commonly talked about, the actions in a RuneQuest combat correspond with what we imagine might actually happen in a melee - someone swings a sword at you, you are in big trouble unless you can parry it with another weapon or shield or get out of the way. Unlike level-based games, in RQ all human beings have more or less the same range of hit points, unless increased as the result of magic or from heroquesting. People often call this the "realism" in RuneQuest combat mechanics.
However, I think that misses the point. The realism of RQ combat IMO is not in the values given for hit points or the specific spread between hit locations, or how skill values are calculated. It is from the results of combat - from the inherent dangers in resorting to violence. Combat always poses a risk in *RuneQuest*. I was playtesting the new rules recently with a group of players that included Rob Heinsoo. What everyone noted is how deliberate the decision to resort to violence needs to be in *RuneQuest* - battle is dangerous, and not something lightly undertaken.

Not only that, but *RuneQuest* is not balanced in the traditional sense. Your characters will regularly encounter things that are simply more powerful than they are and the only sensible response to these encounters is to flee. The Crimson Bat, Cwim, heck even some Full Priest dragonewts and their followers, could wipe out whole parties of rune lords and rune priests. Some monsters are so dangerous that the only way to have a chance is to first quest into the Gods World to find some mythological vulnerability or bypass.

The result of this is a sense of fragile mortality that is utterly unlike most other RPG experiences. In *HeroQuest*, you play the protagonist of a narrative, in *13th Age*, you play an epic hero - but in *RuneQuest*, no matter how mighty you are, defeat and disaster is always just around the corner. You could say it is anti-heroic heroic fantasy.

No matter how it is sliced, *RuneQuest* is crunchy. But granularity that is not used in play can be discarded. A lot of the RQ3 granularity read better than it played, and I've gone through and tried to hack it out. Remember, rules that don't get used shouldn't be in the book.

As we continue to fine tune the new Chaosium edition of *RuneQuest*, more and more I find I'm stripping rules down to about *RuneQuest* 2.5, and then we're working in the consequences of Runes and Passions.

The new combat rules are primarily derived from RQ2, including how certain attributes such as hit points and weapon characteristics work. However, Runes and Passions have a potentially big impact on combat mechanics - but not on the combat results.

Both Runes and Passions allow the character to be inspired within certain limitations. For example, the Air Rune is the rune of violence and destruction. A character in the midst of a melee combat may try to call upon the primal powers of Air to get a bonus to their sword skill. A character strongly loyal to their temple may try to inspire themselves when carrying out a cult mission. In playtesting, people have strongly role-played their Runes and passions and have a game incentive to do so.

But inspiration can and does fail, resulting in penalties across the board. There are no hero points or luck points to bail the adventurer out - and in the end even your Rune Lord-Priest with their heroquest gifts will face mortality's sharp bite!

**Editions**

I figured in this set of *RuneQuest* Design Notes I'd answer a key question that we get quite often - "are you using the [pick a rule] from RQ [pick an edition]!"
One of the mantras we have in writing the new edition is "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." In RQ2 the main things that were broken were - 5% skill increase set, one-use rune magic, lack of objective drives for characters, lack of strong community resources, spirit combat, shamanism, and the price economy.

And - significantly - tied into it was the fact that the game was called "RuneQuest" and yet the runes were little more than background color.

Those issues are what the new edition addresses. But things that weren't broken - strike ranks, melee rounds, hit points, damage, spirit magic, rune magic basic descriptions, etc - were kept.

A few things, like base value for skills and skill modifier calculations were edited for overall consistency.

RQ2’s strike rank system was initially intended to just be a more tailored and less randomized initiative system that factored in things like weapon length and SIZ. RQ3 hybridized it with the Ringworld Impulse system, which resulted in quite a few problems down the road. The new system goes back to the RQ2 approach.

One substantive change is Attack and Parry are no longer separate skills, but now use the same Weapon Skill. And you parry with a shield at the same skill as the weapon that accompanies it. If you know how to fight with a broadsword, you know how to fight with a broadsword and a shield. Tracking all of those skills read well, but were often illogical in application.

Another is using CHA instead of INT to determine how much spirit magic a character can have - was introduced to be more consistent with what we are modeling.

And of course lots of little tweaks got made as a result of playtesting and as consequences of new rules (particularly pertaining to Rune Points).

But that's been the overall editorial approach to the new edition. This is built directly off the RuneQuest 2 chassis, and is simply not a new layer atop RQ3, the MRQ variants, or TDM's edition. Think instead of it as RQ 2.5 if Greg had managed to solve the Rune Magic problem he worked on for over 20 years!

**On Zeroes to Heroes**

We all know the classic RPG trope - we make a character based on a concept, but when we first start playing them, they generally suck at doing anything. We fumble along through "low level adventures", fighting trollkin or rubble runners, until we've gained enough experience that the character can do the sort of stuff we imagined when we first created them. Only now we are really gaming - but oops! Real life has interfered and the campaign is on hiatus. Sigh.
I hate the "zero to hero" trope - if my character has fought in several battles, let me have the skills that correspond with a veteran warrior. Or if I want to play a priest, give me a reasonable chance of getting there in not too many game sessions. If I want to play a newbie kid just out of initiation, that's fine too, but in Greg's Harmast stories, Harmast is already capable of some pretty impressive deeds during his initiation (as is Lokamayadon, and we all know that Argrath killed four men right after his initiation - just read the comic!).

Another more prosaic issue - time. Back when we all lived in Seattle, David Dunham, Neil Robinson, and I used to game weekly come hell or high water. Nowadays, I do good to game every other week - and I consider myself lucky. We just don't have the time to be able to crunch out long zero-to-hero arcs.

The new RuneQuest is going to reflect that bias. If you want to play a "beginning" character, fine - but if you want to make a weapon master, you can! There's a good chance that a character starting in 1627 has already participated in several major battles, and may already have made a name for themself. As a result, a character's best starting skill is often in the 80%+ range. Frex, a Sartarite veteran warrior starts with a broadsword of 20% (with cultural modifiers). To that add a +15% Manipulation bonus. Our character is a veteran of a light infantry unit, so add another 25% to her broadsword. That gets us to 65%. She decides to be an Orlanth Adventurous initiate, so she gets another 10%, meaning 75%. Finally, she chooses to put the maximum number personal skill points - 25% - into broadsword and bam! She starts at 95% in broadsword - she's a weaponmaster at the start of play!

Initially some people were shocked - it didn't seem right that a character could start as a master. I mean, aren't characters suppose to work their way up to being where we want them to be? After which the next question was, why shouldn't characters be able to start at the skill levels where the player wants them too?

After much reflexion and discussion, the conclusion was that heroes to zeroes is needed to "discover" the character. Traditionally when we rolled up a character, we needed several sessions to "discover" them.

But what if we were able to start a character in media res, having already already enough knowledge of the character's drives and loyalties to be able to safely skip The Introductory Phase?

Runes and passions are part of we accomplish that in the new RuneQuest. New RuneQuest characters start with a psychological element much greater than previous editions. Our exemplar Orlanthi decides to take Air at 100%, Moon at 40%, Movement at 85% (meaning Stasis is at 15%), and Death at 75% (meaning Fertility is at 25%). From that we know she is passionate, impulsive and violent, energetic, rebellious, and ambitious, but also ascetic, ruthless, and relentless - and that she has mystic tendencies. Already, I got a good idea how to play her.

But she also has a history - that's the other we get to "know" our character from the outset. Thanks to the Family Background History, I know that she is a Sartar Loyalist (with a Loyalty Sartar passion of 75%), she's got an Honor passion of 70%, she Hates the Lunar Empire at 60% (her father was devoured by the Crimson Bat!), she participated in the Liberation of Sartar (and was one of those who witnessed Kallyr Starbrow acclaimed as Prince of Sartar), and fought at the Battle of Queens after nearly dying from magical backlash in Kallyr's doomed Lightbringer's Quest. She's an experienced campaigner, who knows her way around a battlefield. I decide to add a Devotion to Orlanth passion of 60%, and I know this character. Why shouldn't a character who has already been through 4 years of war start as a weaponmaster?
(But let's say the I decide I want my character to be a farmer rather than a warrior. With the same stats she again starts with 20% broadsword, plus 15% Manipulation bonus. The Farmer occupation adds just +10% to broadsword, bringing it 45%. She decides to spend another +10% from her personal skills on her broadsword, giving her a starting skill of 55%. She knows how to use a sword, and can consider a life adventuring, but she's not a veteran, let alone a master. Instead she chooses to take on a capable and potentially highly prosperous role in her local community, with a Farming Skill of 95% and the ability to manage tenant farmers at 70%. She also decides to take Scan at 60% and even know a little bit of Bronze Smithing (55%). Particularly good skills since the GM has announced that this is going to be the Risklands Campaign, and the ability to manage a stead is even more important than the ability to fight!)

Now here's a secret - you could always create such experienced characters in RQ3. A 27 year old barbarian warrior from Sartar started with 30% in broadsword. A +12% Manipulation bonus was pretty common for such characters (that's DEX 15, INT 13, STR 17), so now we are at 42%. Add 48% from previous experience and we are already at 90%. The difference is that this is pretty much all we knew about our RQ3 character!

Here's another point - RuneQuest combat is just plain deadly. Having a skill of 95% isn't going to stop you from being killed by arrows (although you should do really well in one-on-one duels). And letting characters start with a few high skills means that you can actually do most of the published adventures - and they are still going to be plenty challenging!

Jumping into the Setting with Family Background

As talked about in the previous designer notes, I'm not a big fan of the "zeroes to heroes" trope. I prefer playing and gamemastering characters who start in media res - that is, they already have a past and have community ties, loyalties, and other passions, which can be used as roleplaying and campaign hooks.

This approach however creates two problems:

* How to come up with those ties and passions so that they "feel" right for your character and are not cookie-cutter passions like everyone else; and

* How to quickly grasp rich settings like Glorantha quickly enough to be able to do this in character generation.

To solve these problems, we've adopted the "Family History" mechanics from Pendragon and tailored it to Dragon Pass. It is quite reminiscent of the clan history process from the King of Dragon Pass computer game, except it develops your character, rather than your community!

In character creation, you can decide which grandparent had the most impact on your character's identity, and then determine what happened to him or her until 1606. Each of these end up being homeland specific, with different outcomes depending on whether the grandparent was from Sartar, Esrolia, Lunar Tarsh, Old Tarsh, the Grazelands, or Prax. Did your grandmother fight at the Battle of Grizzly Peak or plunder Boldhome in 1602? Was your grandfather killed when Belintar raised the Building Wall or did he follow Fazzur Wideread and fight in the Feint to the Sea?
After 1606, you can "retire" your grandparent, and move on to whichever parent most influenced your character. Did your father help the Lunars conquer Prax or did he participate in Starbrow's Rebellion? Was your mother killed by Harrek Berserk in 1616 or by Greymane's raiders the following year or by elf raiders? Did your parent die in the Great Winter making sure you were fed? And so on.

Your character may gain passions or even skill bonuses as a result of the deeds of your ancestors.

Finally in 1624, you may "retire" your parent, and determine what happened to your character prior to the start of play. Your character can't get killed as a result of their participation in the early Hero Wars (although they might have nearly died and gotten a distinctive scar), but it really helps ground your character in the setting. Did you fight in the Siege of Nochet or at the Battle of Pennel Ford? Did you witness the Dragonrise, the betrayal of General Fazzur Wideread or fight at the Second Battle of Moonbroth? Did you survive a murder attempt by supporters of King Pharandos or were you grievously wounded when Jar-eel appeared in the middle of Kallyr's Starbrow heroquest.

\textit{Fenerasa's Saga}

Here's an example of the Family History in play, using the examplar character, Fenerasa the Fierce:

\textbf{Grandmother}

Fenerasa’s paternal grandmother was Ferendatha, a Sartarite scribe in the service of the Prince of Sartar. When she was a young woman, she rode to war alongside King Tarkalor and the Feathered Horse Queen. At the Battle of Grizzly Peak, she witnessed the death of her liege at the hands of the Lunar Empire. Ferendatha survived, and after the Battle of Alda-Chur, she witnessed the Alda-Churi acclaim Terasarin as Prince.

In 1597, Ferendatha traveled to the Holy Country in the company with a member of the Sartar royal house and witnessed his murder at the hands of Lunar assassins.

In 1602 the Lunar army invaded the kingdom of Sartar. Despite being a scribe, Ferendatha died with great glory in the Battle of Boldhome.

\textbf{Father}

Fenerasa’s father, Farnan was a temple orphan who married a wealthy farmer of the Ernaldori clan. In 1613, Farnan abandoned the plow to join in Starbrow’s Rebellion. After its defeat, he personally aided Kallyr Starbrow in her escape from Sartar and then returned to his wife’s farm.

In 1619, Farnan left the farm again to fight against the Lunar Empire. His young daughter, Fenerasa, wanted to follow him, but she was too young. Farnan rallied to the rebel king Broyan of Whitewall, and fought against the Empire in the Hendriking campaign.
In 1620, Farnan was one of the volunteer defenders of Whitewall, then under siege by the Empire. In the Lunar assault on Whitewall, the Crimson Bat devoured Farnan, before it was defeated in turn by King Broyan. Farnan’s soul was annihilated and his daughter swore revenge.

Fenerasa

As soon as she was initiated as an adult, Fenerasa left her mother’s farm to seek to avenge her father against the Lunar Empire. In 1623, she followed King Broyan to the metropolis of Nochet, where she joined its defense during the siege of that city by the Lunars.

She spent a full year in Nochet and when the Lunars broke camp, Fenerasa joined the pursuing army. In 1624, at the Battle of Pennel Ford she fought with great glory and gained the attention of Argrath. When Orlanth’s Ring rose in the sky, she devoted herself to the returned God. She followed Argrath into Dragon Pass and when the White Bull summoned Jaldon Goldentooth, she swore undying loyalty to the Argrath.

In 1625, Fenerasa joined the army of the White Bull in the liberation of Pavis. Pursuing honor again, she fought with great glory at the Second Battle of Moonbroth, and was nearly killed (receiving a nasty scar across her left eye) in the process of killing a Lunar priestess. After the Dragonrise, she returned to her mother’s farm to recover.

In 1626, Feneresa was one of the thousands of people who participated in Kallyr Starbrow’s failed Lightbringer’s Quest. She fought in the Battle of the Queens and was badly wounded trying to defend Kallyr Starbrow.

After the Battle of the Queens, we know Fenerasa’s past and have a good idea of her direction. Her current skill and passion bonuses are:

Battle +35%
Devotion (deity) 70%
Hate Lunar Empire 90%
Honor 90%
Love (family) 60%
Loyalty (Ernaldori clan) 60%
Loyalty (Colymar tribe) 70%
Loyalty (Sartar) 80%
Loyalty (Argrath) 70%

For the player (this was created by one of my playtest players who was not very familiar with Gloranthan lore), she immediately "got" got the character after doing this - and all before determining any other stats. She knew who she was playing, who her character's most important loyalties were, etc. She knew her character really hates the Lunar Empire with an overwhelming passion and is also a strong Sartar nationalist. She's also as loyal to Argrath personally as she is to her tribe - and more so than she loves her own family or clan! Finally, her character's extremely high honor means...
her demand for honor is going to drive her behavior whenever applicable - she'll keep her word even unto death, but also react extremely towards dishonorable actions!

Another player in the same group decided her character would be Ferenasa's half-sister. Same mother, different father and different influential grandparent. Although her events were linked, she ended up with a very different character:

Yanioth Oriothsdaughter

Yanioth's grandmother died at Grizzly Peak defending the Feathered Horse Queen, and her mother (Orioth, a wealthy Ernaldori farmer) stayed completely out of the next twenty-years of conflict. It was a great shock to her mother that Yanioth accompanied her half-sister to Nochet, where she gained the blessing and favor of Queen Samastina of Esrolia. Yanioth was present at the Battle of Pennel Ford, accompanied Argrath to summon Jaldon, and helped acclaim Kallyr Starbrow as Prince. She participated in Kallyr's Lightbringers Quest and fought at the Battle of Queens, where she was nearly killed by Lunar Sorcery. Her current skill and passion bonuses are:

Devotion Ernalda 80
Loyalty (Colymar Tribe) 70
Loyalty (Ernaldori Clan) 60
Love (family) 70
Loyalty (Argrath) 60
Loyalty (Feathered Horse Queen) 60
Loyalty (Sartar) 60
Loyalty (Queen Samastina) 60
Hate Lunar Empire 60

Again, the player knew after this process what kind of character she wanted to play - and knows how her character fits with the other character. Yanioth is driven by her devotion to her goddess and her loyalty to her family and tribe. She has loyalties - possibly conflicting - towards many of the key players in the Hero Wars.

This process takes about thirty minutes to an hour - depending on how much detail the GM and the player wants to go through, but by the end, the player is well-grounded in the Gloranthan setting, and their character is tightly tied into that setting. The Family History not only makes it far easier for the players to jump into the setting - but for the GM, it creates a set of potential campaign twists, where these passions could be put in conflict, offering game possibilities and opportunities for roleplaying.

Sorcery

So, there is a lot of interest in the new sorcery rules for RuneQuest!
Here then is how they work in a nutshell: sorcery involves manipulating one or more Runes with a Technique according to a formula (or "spell").

**Runes and Techniques**

A sorcerer's understanding of the Runes is not based on the sorcerer's personal Rune affinities, nor is it a skill. Instead, a sorcerer either sufficiently understands a Rune well enough to manipulate it or doesn't.

The Techniques are conceptually similar to the Runes. They are not skills, but techniques the sorcerer either understands or does not. The six techniques are:

Combine/Separate; Summon/Dismiss; Command; Tap

Four of the six Techniques are arranged as two sets of polarities; the other two, Command and Tap, are implied in all other techniques. Knowledge of one technique provides insight into its opposite. A character can cast spells using the opposite technique to one they have mastered at double the magic point cost. Thus a character who has mastered Summon can cast Dismiss spells at twice the magic point cost. Note that every technique provides insight into Command and Tap - and vice versa.

A character either has or has not mastered a particular Rune or Technique - these are not skills. A starting sorcerer has mastered one Rune and one Technique. More can be learned, but the total number known is limited by the sorcerer's INT. Runes and Techniques, once learned, cannot be unlearned.

So a Lhankor Mhy initiate who has learned sorcery will have mastered the Truth Rune and the Command. An Aeolian of the wizard caste has much greater flexibility and starts with any two Runes and one Technique.

**Spells**

A spell is a formula combining one or more Runes with one more Techniques to produce an effect. It is a skill. For example, the Conflagration spell combines the Fire Rune and Summon to summon a fire into existence within the range of the spell. The intensity of the fire depends on how many magic points are used. Another example: the Boon of Kargan Tor is a spell combining Death and Summons to increase the damage done by the weapon.

Each spell is a specific skill with specific effects. One spell combining Fire and Summon will have very different effect from another spell combining Fire and Summon. New spells can be learned from teachers or through research, and new spells can be created by the sorcerer with enough time. A sorcerer may memorize as many spells as they have points of INT - unlike Runes and Techniques, spells may be forgotten.

The intensity of a spell measures how many magic points are being put into the spell. Magic points can be used to increase the spell's duration, its range, and its strength. No additional skills are needed to do this - just plenty of magic.
points. Sorcerers need large amounts of magic points, far more than spirit magicians or Rune masters. The Malkioni religion allows sorcerers to use a portion of the magic points generated by all the worshipers in a Worship Invisible God ceremony, but the Lhankor Mhy sorcerers have no such advantage (although they do have Rune spells).

The total intensity of a spell cannot be more than the sorcerer's INT less the number of points of spirit magic possessed by the sorcerer. This is what is now referred to as Free INT (and has nothing to do with the number of sorcery spells the sorcerer knows).

**Bonuses and Penalties**

Finally, sorcerers get bonuses or penalties for casting magic on Rune appropriate days, weeks, and seasons, and bonuses for casting spells in Rune appropriate places or using Rune appropriate components. Maintaining the ancient Brithini caste restrictions provide bonuses to a sorcerer's Free Int.

**Runes, Passions, and Rune Spells**

Some of the most significant changes to the new RuneQuest are Runes and Passions, and the use of Rune Points to cast Rune Spells. These new features are easy for players and GMs to get the hang of, but they add tremendously to player opportunities. This has really been apparent in our recent playtesting, taking both experienced RQ hands and RuneQuest novices through 'The Broken Tower', the introductory adventure that is part of our RuneQuest Quickstart.

In practice, Runes and Passions give your players a bonus based on how they roleplay their adventurer (not how well they roleplay, but how they have their character act). You act consistently in accordance with the Air Rune - you likely are going to have a nice bonus to your combat skills (Air is violence after all). And so on. This creates a virtuous cycle between how your adventurer acts and their likelihood of success at activities related to those actions - and incentivises roleplaying your adventurer as a Gloranthan character.

This particularly helps an adventurer out with skills that they have not yet really developed with experience or training, So your adventurer with a 90% Beast Rune wants to call upon her inner beast to help her track her prey - even though her Track skill is say only 35%, she's likely got an effective skill of 55% through use of her Rune. That makes a big difference and rewards you for playing your adventurer consistent with her Runes.

Rune Points end up making Rune magic much more common and more useful. In earlier editions, you used to have to "pre-buy" your Rune Spells - as a result, you tried to figure out what was likely the most useful spell. Spells like Shield and Heal Wound got sacrificed for a lot more than spells like Increase/Decrease Wind or Divination. And those neat special spells like Cloud Call rarely got sacrificed for at all.

But with Rune points, you don't pre-buy specific Rune spells. Instead you can spend your Rune points to cast ANY spell known to your cult and subcult. Rune magic isn't automatic - you do need to roll against the Rune of the spell, but usually your cult Runes are your best Runes (and if they aren't - what are you doing?). Suddenly, Rune magic becomes much more useful.
And your adventurer can replenish their Rune points through participating in a worship ceremony at an appropriate temple or holy place - so casting Rune magic is a lot more attractive than the one-use spells of RQ2 and RQ3. Of course, you are unlikely to be able replenish your Rune points while you are adventuring, so you still need to think carefully about how many Rune points you use!

Welcome to Glorantha

A mythic world of mortals and gods, myths and cults, monsters and heroes. In Glorantha, the Runes permeate everything, and mastery of Runes allows astonishing feats of bravery and magic.

Glorantha is an ancient world, and has known many ages, but now it is at the brink of the greatest conflict it has ever known... the Hero Wars.

Glorantha is the setting of RuneQuest, one of the oldest and most influential roleplaying games ever published.

This Quickstart collects all the essential rules for RuneQuest: Roleplaying in Glorantha and presents them in abbreviated form.

Use this booklet to start playing immediately, and to discover the improvements to the system. These game rules and a new adventure—The Broken Tower—preview the newest edition of RuneQuest, developed in close consultation with the designers and authors of the original RuneQuest and of Glorantha.

The Broken Tower, set in the heart of the Dragon Pass, is suitable for up to 5 adventurers and one gamemaster, complete with all the rules needed to play.
Rules Lawyers and How to Stop Them

by Neal Litherland

You're ready for a night of adventure and intrigue! You have your dice set out where you want them, your books and laptop are close to hand, and you have bookmarks on all the pages you'll need for reference. You have a case full of soda, and a buffet of snacks just waiting for your players. No matter how well-prepared you are, though, you know one of your players is going to raise objections. We'll call him Jim. Jim is a guy who knows this game like the back of his hand, and he can argue how the rules work better than anyone you've ever seen. The problem is that he's crossed that line from a player who knows the game, to a player who's become a rules lawyer. He's a good player, and you don't want to get rid of him, but you really wish there was a way to mitigate this tendency he has to clear his throat and correct anyone who does something against the rules.

Fear not, fellow Dungeon Master. I'm here to help. All you need to do in order to keep your rules lawyers from bringing down your game is to follow these simple steps.

Step One: Have A Pre-Game Talk

The best thing you can do to nip rules lawyer complaints in the bud is to sit down, before the game starts, and make sure you are familiar with the particular rules all your players are going to be using the most. For example, if you have one player whose character is totally focused on grappling, then you need to know how grappling rules work. If you have another character who is largely stealth based, then be sure you are familiar with all of the nuances that come with concealment, cover, and opposed checks. If you have someone playing a variant of a wizard who casts through psychic power, make sure you know how that works instead of just trusting the player to get it right.

This serves two functions. First, it gives you a tight grasp of what your party is capable of, and it ensures that you and your players are on the same page regarding how the mechanics of the game work. Having them explain their abilities to you ensures that you both agree on how those abilities function. Secondly, it lets you identify and correct any red flags before the action gets going. This prevents you from being in the middle of a tense situation, and needing to make rulings on the fly.

Mostly, anyway.

Step Two: Rule Like a Judge

Even if you do all of your prep work, there will still be incidents where a rules lawyer may try to argue something. Most of the time this will happen in the midst of a busy situation, like combat, or when the rules may be unclear. In order to resolve these instances quickly, you need to institute the following format, and make sure all your players agree to it. If you'll notice, it's not dissimilar to how things work in a courtroom.

First, ask the player who raised an objection to read the relevant ability or rules section they're talking about. It is their job, as the person making the objection, to have the section ready to hand. This prevents players from misquoting a rule from memory, which saves a great deal of time and argument.

Second, allow the objecting player to make a case for his view of how an ability should work. Listen to the objection,
and ask any questions you have as the DM, but keep it short, simple, and to the point.

Third, make a ruling. Once your ruling has been given, it is final for this session. If you need to, write it down so there's no confusion about what you said. The matter is not to be brought up again, and the game should be allowed to proceed with the ruling given.

All told, making a ruling with this three-step process should take no more than a few minutes. It will help keep the game on-track, and cutting off any further arguments or objections on the matter means that players making an objection need to make their case clearly, and accept the results you give them.

**Step Three: In-Depth Conversation and Research After The Session**

Not all your rulings will be perfect, but if they haven't done any permanent damage to your game (ie. no one's character died because of your ruling) then you can look at any issue more in-depth later. If a player is still unhappy with the way a ruling was made (whether that player was your resident rules lawyer, or another player entirely), take some time between sessions to talk the rule over more in-depth. Ask about it on forums, and look for any clarification you may have missed. If it turns out you wish to change your ruling, or add nuance to it, then you should make that announcement to your table before your next session gets rolling.

**Step Four: Stay on Top of The Characters' Development**

Keeping your rules lawyer defenses up isn't a once-and-done sort of thing; you have to refresh yourself in order to stay current throughout your game. That means whenever characters gain new abilities, special equipment, or other tools they can use in future encounters, you need to have another conversation with your players to ensure you're all on the same page again. If you do this long enough it will become reflex; part of the routine of leveling up, spending XP, or whatever mechanic your game uses for increasing a character's relative power.

**Every Group Has Its Own Rhythm**

If you've gamed with the same group for a while, chances are good that you already have a rhythm that works for you. You know your fellow players, and you've all established your own group policies. Maybe you encourage players to discuss strategy out of character, maybe you forbid it. Perhaps you want all character sheets a few days in advance when players have added abilities or gained a level so you can do a review, and maybe you trust your players to do that job on their own.

The method of resolving rule disputes and objections I've put forth here isn't a game requirement. It's just a suggestion. If you already have something in place that works for your group, then keep doing it. If you don't have something in place, or you want to try something different to see if this method works better, then go forth and play! The only real judge of how well a method works is how well your players like it, and if it helps your game. Hopefully that is what DMs and players alike will get out of this suggestion.

Originally from: http://www.infobarrel.com/How_To_Stop_Rules_Lawyers_From_Ruining_Your_Tabletop.Game
Tense Up
by Sidney Icarus

Interest Curve, Scenebuilding, Stakes, Storytelling

Tension as an Incentive to Play

We play Dungeons and Dragons for a number of reasons, but all of us can agree to a need for tension. Whether tactical
combat powergamers, self-expressive artists, creative collaborators, or drama nerds, there is no type of player or
Dungeon Master that doesn’t seek tension in our play. This is because tension exists where things matter, and we all
want our games to mean something.

Tension is the feeling of excitement that you get in the pit of your stomach when two conditions are filled: The
outcome is unknown, and the outcome is important. The outcome is unknown simply means that there is a pretty
reasonable chance that a couple of mutually exclusive outcomes could occur. The outcome is important means that it
matters to the player which outcome occurs. If there players know what's going to happen, or (even worse) if they don't
care, there is no tension.

Combat Encounters, or You’re Already Doing It Right

Players often feel the most tension during Combat Encounters. Combat holds an inherent tension thanks to the 5e
system and the good habits which we have formed. Combats that hold tension have an uncertain outcome (life or death)
and that outcome is important (because everyone loves their characters).

Here’s a great example from DDAL05-02 The Black Road by Paige Leitman and Ben Heisler:

[Box Text]As you start up the narrow path up the hill, a bugbear bursts from the trees. “We’ll be takin’ your caravan for
Bad Fruul, and burn your blood for Hruggek!” He roars and lets out a mighty kick, and with a loud SNAP, a huge log
starts to roll down the narrow path.

We can already see, from that opening narration that we’ve fulfilled our two requirements: The outcome is in doubt
(Big bugbears with the drop on us, a disadvantageous fighting position, and a trap) and the outcome matters (this is to
the death).

Contest Encounters, or Bards Are People Too

Contest encounters are those scenes where players are talking or acting, and not swinging their swords. I paraphrase
Fate to describe them as "any time characters have mutually exclusive goals, but are not intending to deliver physical
harm upon each other." As-written in Wizards content, the social contests mostly suck. Either the Contest isn’t in doubt
because it’s usually plot relevant, or it doesn’t matter because it has no relevant cost or benefit.

Here’s an example from DDAL05-03 Uninvited Guests by Robert Alaniz (which is otherwise an excellently interesting
adventure!):

[Paraphrased from two pages of text]The Party stumbles upon Prince Thornacious, a small fey sprite who is (notably)
royalty. The Party wants meat for a banquet that to be held in town, and have come to his forest to hunt. If the Party
succeeds at negotiations he directs them to a hunting ground where they can fight a combat encounter to get the meat
they need, giving them a little help (consumable item). If the party fails at negotiations he offers them a chance to leave
immediately, also directing them to the hunting ground as per success. If The Party refuses to leave, or engages in
combat, he fights them. Then they can take whatever game they want from this forest.

Wow. What are the stakes of this Contest? Fight sprites, fight hobgoblins, or fight hobgoblins with a point or two of
exhaustion. That’s...super unengaging. The negotiation’s result is in doubt (ie you can fail) but that failure means
nothing. It’s a roll to see if Prince Thornacious makes you immune to the mist of his forest, which is possibly one of the
most low stakes rolls in an adventure ever. Not to mention players aren’t aware that making them immune is what he
intends to do. The adventure does have the spurned party come back for the finale (either fey or hobgoblins) but the
players aren’t aware of that. Those stakes are never foreshadowed, so they’re never relevant to choices made in this
Contest.

Challenge Encounters, or I Took Two Levels in Rogue For This

Challenge Encounters usually don’t have an active opposition (another party or NPC), and often the challenge to be
overcome is architectural (a constructed puzzle) or environmental (the natural world). It’s not really important how you
structure them mechanically, except that they tend to involve the use of a variety of the characters’ skills, and some of
them even involve the use of players’ skills (solving a puzzle or similar).

Tension in these is lost when (too often, way too often) DMs implement these as a roadblock (what the MMO
community refer to as a gear check) that must be passed before the players are allowed to engage with the rest of the
story. The outcome is not in doubt. We pass it or we sit here forever until the DM texts a player the answer or just feels
sorry for us. By the same token, most puzzles aren’t important because they don’t reward the party with anything more
than progression of plot, and don’t cost anything more than real-player-time.

Here is an example from DDEX3-1 Harried in Hillsfar by Shawn Merwin, an adventure that isn’t worth your time,
except as an excellent case study of what-not-to-do.

[Box text]This room continues the motif of elf and demon comingling. Nine gaping demonic maws adorn the walls of
the room, each with a number on them: one through nine. The maws are holes in the walls large enough to climb
through, but the gaps are filled with a magical darkness that obscures what is on the other side. The floor and the rest of
the walls form a mosaic that obviously represent the Abyss, the home of the demons. The infinite layers of that horrific
place are represented with breathtaking and terrible beauty.

[DM text] No skills or spells can discern a difference between the maws, and nothing happens if the characters reach a
limb or throw an object into them. Only when an adventurer steps through completely does anything happen.
Characters stepping through the maw labeled 8 (the symbol of infinity representing the endless Abyss) on the map find
the hallway into the final room. An adventurer stepping through any other maw are spit back out and take 3 points of
necrotic damage. That maw then magically closes, removing it as an option.

Not only is it really poorly foreshadowed, it’s also Not in Doubt, and Not Important. Do you have more than 24hp in
your entire party? You’ll pass this. Just try every door. Also, there’s no rush. Take a long rest here. This is without
touching on the fact that the adventure doesn’t progress past this point until you solve it. There isn’t an alternative
outcome and there’s no change in the story. The party can spend a year and a half trying to solve this puzzle and the
box text for the next encounter declares their arrival is “perfect”. The stakes don’t exist.

Tools to Take Away

The Outcome Must Be In Doubt: Point of Decision, Costs to Choices, No Railroading

No encounter should be make-or-break. If the PCs MUST achieve a certain outcome to continue the plot, then there is
no point of decision. Combat encounters can end in death/capture. Social contests can end with a hard no, or yes with a
large cost. Challenges can be failed. There are stakes! Don't fudge your numbers. Don't pull your punches.

Demand their Key Resources. You've been doing this in combat, where failure to hit means the baddie gets another turn, where they can take character's HP, and each success relieves that cost. Try the same thing in your skill challenges, failure costs something. Each failure to barter with the spy increases the price of information. Each failure to disarm the magical glyph or interpret the ciphered tome drains from the wizard a spell slot.

Begin with questions. Don't design "the PCs get the information from the King". Instead "Does the King give the PCs the information?" or "What will it cost the PCs to get the information from the King?" The outcome must be in doubt means it must be in doubt to the DM as well.

Sid Meier says players start to feel certain about an outcome at about 3:1 or 4:1 odds, that’s a good rule of thumb. Players should feasibly be able to fail more than 1 time in every 4 (which will require you to ensure good failure states).

Your Encounter Question must be able to be answered in both Yes, and No. At worst, Yes And, Yes But, but No is so much more interesting.

**The Outcome Must Be Important: Success Matters, Failure Matters, Players Know It**

Make your outcomes matter. If success means continuation of plot, and failure means sitting there, there's boring. Instead success means the plot continues AND, and failure means plot continues BUT.

The more success gives, and the more failure takes, the more tension you will generate and the higher your players will sit on the interest curve. With that in mind, moderate it. Know when to give them a dip, where the stakes are gentler, but know how to kick that encounter into gear if you see them falling asleep.

Give failure a resource cost - Time, Gold, HP, Slots. Just ensure you’re targeting resources on- or off-axis as necessary to increase or decrease the tension.

Declare the stakes to your players. Tell them that if they succeed they'll decode the tome and get a 3rd level scroll. Tell them if they fail the Tome will explode and do 4d6 damage to everyone. Sure, the characters don't know this, but we're not trying to emotionally affect characters, we’re trying to emotionally affect players. People can't emotionally react to stakes of which they are unaware.

Getting your tension right will be one of the most rewarding things you can do as a DM. All players, regardless of their psychographics, want some sort of tension. Your ability to keep tension on-curve and interesting will ensure you keep your players engaged and excited, and it will ensure that your games mean something.

*Originally from: https://action-economy.com/words/tense-up*
Validate Your PC's Intent

by Sidney Icarus

"Your intent, whatever it is, always takes precedence over the mechanics." - Fate Core SRD

This sentence exists in the "running the game" section of the Fate Core rulebook, and talks about something that Evil Hat Productions and I both believe is important enough to warrant the following paragraph:

"This might seem like common sense, but we call it out because the order is important. In other words, don’t look at the rules as a straitjacket or a hard limit on an action. Instead, use them as a variety of potential tools to model whatever you’re trying to do. Your intent, whatever it is, always takes precedence over the mechanics. Most of the time, the very definition of an action makes this easy—any time your intent is to harm someone, you know that’s an attack. Any time you’re trying to avoid harm, you know that’s a defense. But sometimes, you’re going to get into situations where it’s not immediately clear what type of action is the most appropriate. As a GM, don’t respond to these situations by forbidding the action. Instead, try to nail down a specific intent, in order to point more clearly to one (or more) of the basic game actions."

Intent as an Element of Play

Your PCs' intent is, in the most simple words, what they want to achieve. It's what success looks like, and what failure looks like, it encompasses not only what they do, but how they see it resolving. Sometimes intent is set by the mechanics, like in combat: When a player makes an attack, success is that they deal weapon/spell damage plus their appropriate modifier, failure is that they miss. Their action is "cast magic missile", their intent is "to hurt the bad guy in order to remove them as an obstacle." But intent can be murky too, and it's part of the First Question: What Do You Do?

When asking What Do You Do? we're also asking What Are You Trying To Achieve? because that drastically changes how we approach both the mechanics and the narrative. Here is an example from a game I was running at my local store: There's a gnoll standing on a platform high in the trees, he's right on the edge. It's a 20 foot drop. Oh boy that looks appetising. Our Monk turns to me and says "I'm gonna flying kick this dude. Does a 17 do it?" I gave him one of my favourite lines to use as a DM "I'm so glad you asked that question. What do you do?" "I flying and kick him in the chest, putting all my weight through his sternum. Y'all seen The Raid? I The Raid him."

Now there are two ways I can approach this, and I want you to think of how you'd approach it: Is it an attack dealing the monks unarmed damage and giving him access to everything else he can do (flurry, extra attacks, whatever), or do I rule it as a shove, pushing the gnoll back and off the platform? They target different mechanics, they achieve different effects. So how do I make this decision? Do I calculate which one does the most damage? Do I just pick one randomly? Do I stack some rolls on top of each other to give him both effects if the gnoll fails a save? What does he risk if he fails? How do I narrate the results?

And that's just how I'm thinking. I'm limiting my thoughts by mechanics, rulings, and fairness. My player is under no such stipulations, especially new players who don't have their head around rules yet. What if he expects to do both? What if he thinks that his character and the narrative supports him kicking the gnoll in the face, doing regular damage, having the gnoll drop his magic stick, then fall off take falling damage, but his monk (expecting the drop) grabs the magic stick, rolls with it and lands on top of him, finally giving him an opportunity to use his unarmed strike bonus action to execute him. To the player that might be a completely valid intent supported by the narrative, I mean, he's a monk, he's a hero. That's what monk heroes do. He rolls a 20, and he expects to be given all of that. As a DM I need to limit things within the existing action economy (wink wink) and keep it fair for all parties, so that intent is invalid, and the player's expectations are too high, and even with the hot-damn natural 20 I'm going to disappoint him, and
regardless of his double damage, he's going to feel terrible.

**Intent Defines Emotional Response**

The way a player feels is critical. People are not rational decision makers (especially in their games and hobbies) they are emotional. Which means that you're not running a game for how it works, you're running a game for how it feels. Everyone (including DMs) are emotional beasts, which is why it feels so good when we pull it off and our table-mates say "that was so tense", or hear their laughter, or (if it's the kind of group with whom you play) catch a soft tear in the moonlight. So understanding and actualising your PCs' intent allows you to work together towards the same emotional response. Working together toward these emotional responses creates a bigger and better feeling than doing it solo would too, which is why you laugh more at stand-up comedy with your mates, why it feels better to grieve with your lover, and why we play tabletop games in groups.

Back to our monk and gnoll, what are we trying to feel? Does our monk want to feel like a kung-fu master, unleashing all of his second level glory upon this gnoll's ribcage? Or does our monk want to feel like the clever battlefield tactician and knock him backwards, toppling off the cliff? It's critical that you as the DM totally understand what feeling the player is going for because if they succeed on their roll, and you fail to deliver that feeling, they will feel cheated. Worse than a miss, they'll have their success stolen from them. That's when the player sighs, checks Facebook, and zones out until their next turn.

**Tools to Take Away**

The simplest tool with which I can present you is this: ask your players what success looks like. Dungeon World refers to this as "Tell them the requirements or consequences and ask." Here are some great "and asks" to give your players:

"What are you trying to achieve?"
"What does success look like to you?"
"What's your best-case scenario?"
"What happens if you miss?"
"What are you willing to stake on this?"

Or more leading options like:

"If you miss, you're both going over the edge, are you okay with that?"
"You can do damage, or you can push him, but you can't do both. Which do you want more?"
"If you want to do damage and push him, it'll cost you 5 damage for every 5 feet. Everything under takes his hp. Cool?"
and the most important, after you've narrated your resolution and the mechanical impacts:
"Is that fair? How does that sound to you?"

You must ask your question(s) before the player rolls. You need to validate the player's intent prior to the action occurring. Evil Hat's comment "the order is important" has a double-barrelled meaning when it comes to intent. Stakes need to be assigned prior to the gamble of the dice. Once the dice hit the table, your player is already emotionally invested in their intent, and if the numbers are good they now believe they deserve it. Worse, if your player fails, and you pull the trigger on what you disagree to be the valid failure state, your player will riot. Imagine the reverse of the monk situation: Our player wants to kick the gnoll. We think he's trying to do some cool unarmed strike damage-and-push move, the player just wants to do their 1d4 damage. They roll a 3. You think "bigger impact, bigger risk" so you resolve the gnoll tumbling off the edge, grabbing the monk and dragging them down with them. Sure that might be fair, but they don't feel that way, because you're not responding to their intent, because you didn't validate it, and now you're playing different games.

When we make a d20 check we say "the story can go this way or that, so let's see which way it goes." Player intent is
saying "I want it to work out in this direction" and the DM setting stakes is saying "I think it will be interesting if it goes this way" or "I like your idea, but it's going to cost you this amount of risk." This needs to be a negotiation, a conversation. Your player's intent needs to be valid, and the roll's risk needs to commensurate. Talk to your players, ask the right questions, and play the same game. This is why we play RPGs in groups.

Originally from: https://action-economy.com/words/validate-your-pcs-intent

(Image is part of the flowchart of Aftermath!'s combat system. So what is your intent here?)
A Mathematical Analysis of D&D 5e Races
by Karl Brown

Playtesting & help from Michel Trepanier, Jeffrey Moore, Doug Irwin, Bailee (Zynx), Jason Bird, Craig Sanders, and Elizabeth A Bowman.

Further playtesting by: Tyrone McElvenny, Nebulous, David Clarke, Marisa Clarke, Gus Cowling Evie Cowling, Claire St George, Paul Bladon, and Sir Gwain. Thanks to Gatekeeper Games Melbourne Australia for providing an excellent venue.


An overview
This article discusses my mathematical analysis of races in D&D 5e and what I discovered.

Its own book
I set out to reverse engineer the system used by WOTC’s designers to create races (if you don’t believe there is one, keep reading) and eventually released it as a free PDF book of 68 pages. Much too big to publish within this periodical! The book includes a race design system and over 30 example races in short form. There is also an optional excel file where you can dig into my math, review the evidence, and create more complex designs. A new revision (version 2.03) should be out by the end of April 2017. Some of the text for this article was lifted from the book. Here are the links:

https://rpggeek.com/filepage/120857/reverse-engineering-wotcs-race-creation-system-opt

https://rpggeek.com/filepage/120858/excel-file-optional-extra-race-creation-article

This second edition benefits from over two years of play-testing and development. You may use the work linked above to create races for publication if I am credited as “Additional game design by Karl David Brown”. I expect no other payment for this work.

Previous D&D 5e articles
In issue 25 I presented two articles for D&D 5e. The first, co-authored with Lev Lafayette, was a review discussing what kinds of games D&D 5e would do well, what its limits are, and comparing it to other fantasy RPGs. Much of the current article was born out of trying to overcome the limits on creativity set by D&D 5e. The second article in that
issue was a quick conversion for using monsters as player character races written at a time when the only races where those in the PHB. Frankly, I soon became disillusionsed with the process o s outlined in that second article which led to the larger project I’ll be discussing here.

In issues 28 and 31 I introduced my campaign setting ‘The Green Isles’. The Green Isles allows players to assume the roles seen in British fairy tales and therefore future articles will include fairies, talking animals, and other new races built with the design system being discussed here.

Why do this analysis?
D&D does not give you a design system to create your own races, this really limits the kinds of worlds you can create. I wanted to use D&D because it was popular and would suit the heroic action I had planned for some of my projects but I needed a way to create many balanced PC races to suit my worlds. Most fan-created races are created by using the Player’s Handbook (PHB) races as a rough template in a ’monkey see, monkey do’ fashion and relying on intuition to judge whether the traits and overall result are balanced. The problem is every edition of D&D is essentially a new game; some game systems have survived with only minor changes for decades. With a new game this past experience from other ‘editions’ can be misleading and so intuition is flawed.
To overcome this I have analyzed all the race and feat traits in the PHB, Dungeon Master’s Guide (DMG), and Elemental Evil Player’s Companion (EEPC) and then reverse engineered the system Wizards of the Coast uses in-house to create PC races. There may be differences in some of the relative point values presented here but otherwise this is very close to what WOTC uses. This provides a basis beyond intuition to evaluate races and greater creative freedom than using existing races as templates. I’m confident most of the races produced by this process will be balanced.

Why do you even think they have a system?
Some people do not think WOTC has a secret in-house system for me to reverse-engineer. I believe that there is a system because WOTC is investing millions of dollars based on detailed math created and maintained by a team that is likely to have a shifting membership over several years, WOTC is going to want records to ensure the continuity of future products. Probably information gleaned from practical play concerns etc. are fed back into the evolving document at WOTC. Therefore what I have reverse-engineered is a ‘snapshot’ of that evolving document taken at the time the EEPC was released. Since I have reverse-engineered a WOTC system my work should be able to predict new material by WOTC. I predicted that WOTC would eventually use negative ability score adjustments to ability scores before the first instance was published in VGM. Furthermore, most of the races in the Sword Coast Adventurer’s Guide also are priced at the target value of 12pt by the system (Mean average: 11.58, Median average: 12.00, Mode Average: 12.00, Standard Deviation: 2.77, I have not analyzed VGM races yet.).

How was the analysis done?
My base data set was all races and race traits in the PHB, DMG, and EEPC. This includes feats because Variant Human grants a feat, and some spells because some races and feats grant these. Classes where not analyzed. My findings may not hold true for classes. You cannot use my work to create or assess new classes.
All costs are relative to ability scores. I arbitrarily set +1 ability score = 2pt. We know from the human that a race is 12pt and the variant rule for humans gives us the means to price a few other items. For example at first level feats are worth 6pt. If we place in the known items then we can try to find values for the unknowns so that all races add up to 12pt and all feats are worth 6pt.
Essentially it’s a giant algebra problem. A=Ability score, we set A=2
R= any race

\[ \text{Human is } 6 \times A = R = 12 \]
Variant Human is $2 \times A + F + S + L = R = 12$. Where $F$ is feat, $S$ is Skill and $L$ is extra language. We know $2 \times A = 4$ Therefore $F + S + L = 12 - 4 = 8$. The allow range for each of values for these three traits is 0 to 8 at this stage.

Half elf is $A \times 4 + 2 \times S + D + Z + L = R = 12$. $D$ is Darkvision 60ft, $Z$ = fey ancestry. So $S + D + Z + L = 12 - A \times 4 = 4$. This also tells us $S + L$ from the variant human equals 4 or less, not 8 or less. The allowed range for these two traits is now smaller.

As we continue to add more races and feats the allowed ranges for more traits are determined and those allowed ranges narrow usually to a single value.

The more traits a race shares with other races the more certain we can be of these cross-referenced point values. The half-elf in particular is an excellent ‘Rossetta Stone’ because it shares traits with humans and several other races. There are a lot more details of my methods in the larger book including how I not only assigned values but also rated how certain I was each trait’s value and (in the Excel file) provided the page numbers of evidence used.

To make a new race just select 12pt worth of traits.

Why do you assume that all canon races are of equal value?

I make this assumption for two reasons.

Firstly, I believe WOTC would intend to design races that are equal at the table.

This view is supported by press releases and communications with fans wherein WOTC consistently reflects the fanbase’s obsession with ‘balance’. As fans we can argue if they succeeded forever. This issue is compounded because every group plays differently; even if the rules are identical the mix of challenges and how they are presented varies from group to group.

Secondly, the assumption makes it possible to replace most guesswork with math. Using this assumption I remove much of the ‘why’ of judgment, and judgment is really just another word for guessing; guessing what WOTC’s designers were thinking. By making this one assumption I can avoid hundreds of other judgment calls (guesses). Where possible I limit guesswork by using math. If I do not make this assumption the math CANNOT be done and I am reduced to guessing the values of every trait like everyone else then arguing the relative merits of traits qualitatively and endlessly like everyone else.

If I assume that canon races are not worth the same amount of points then my project cannot be done at all.

Why did I price this or that trait the way I did?

Your experience and reasoning may lead you to believe that a particular trait is more or less useful in play than my pricing would indicate. The problem is everyone has differing opinions about these relative values. This is why I use math to remove as much of my own judgment as possible. In the book I give you a rating of confidence in evidence and list the page numbers for the evidence I used for each trait. After all that I still tell you to change anything you don’t agree with.

What I found out (and predictions)

Breakdown of the PHB and DMG races / relative trait values

These are abbreviated summaries are intended to show how canon races were created with the 12pt+lesser traits skeleton. You can use the listed values to mix-and-match 12pt worth of traits to create new races. It shows the relative values of many traits. Many more are listed in the book.

Human: 6x+1 ability score (12). Lesser Trait: one language is free choice
**Human Variant:** 2x +1 ability scores (4), feat (6, a feat is worth only 4 at 4th level), skill (2). Lesser Trait: one language is free choice.

**Dwarf Base:** +2 Con (4), Speed 25 (-4), Weapon proficiencies (Martial melee x2 (1), Stone cunning (0.5), advantage on saves v. poison (0.5). Lesser traits: darkvision 60’, simple melee proficiencies x2, resistance to poison, Tool proficiency.

**Hill Dwarf:** Wis+1 (2), +1hp/level starting at first level (8, note hp seem to be worth more during the first tier of play).

**Mountain Dwarf:** +2Str (4), light armour proficiency (4), medium armour proficiency (2)

**Elf Base:** Dexterity+2 (4), perception skill (2), Lesser traits: darkvision 60ft, fey ancestry, trance.

**High Elf:** Int+1 (2), 2x martial melee and 1x martial ranged 1 weapon proficiencies (2), cantrip (2). Lesser traits: 1 x simple ranged weapon, extra language.

**Wood Elf:** Wis+1 (2), 2x martial melee and 1x martial ranged 1 weapon proficiencies (2), speed 35ft (0.5), mask of the wild (1.5). Lesser traits: simple ranged weapon proficiency.

**Dark Elf:** Cha+1 (2), sunlight sensitivity (-7), weapon proficiencies 2x martial melee and 1x martial ranged (2), cantrip (2), 2x combat spells each gained two levels after a wizard gains access to that spell level (3.5 each). Lesser traits: another 60ft of darkvision.

**Eldarin:** Int+1 (2), non-offensive 2nd level spell at 1st level (2), 2x martial melee and 1x martial ranged 1 weapon proficiencies (2). Lesser traits: simple range weapon proficiency

**Halfling Base:** Dexterity+2 (4), Small size (-2), Speed 25ft (-4), Lucky (3.75), Brave (3.75), Halfling Nimbleness (4).

**Lightfoot Halfling:** Cha+1 (2), Naturally Stealthy (0.5). Lesser traits: nil

**Stout Halfling:** Con+1 (2) Advantage on poison saves (0.5). Lesser traits: resistance to poison.

**Dragonborn:** Str+2(4), Cha+1(2), Breath weapon (6). Lesser traits: damage resistance one type.

**Gnome Base:** Int+2 (4), Small size (-2), Speed 25ft (-4), Advantage on Int saves against magic (4), Advantage on Wis saves against magic (4), Advantage on Cha saves against magic (4). Lesser trait: darkvision 60ft.

**Forest Gnome:** Dex+1 (2), cantrip (2), speak with small beasts (1). Lesser traits: nil

**Rock Gnome:** Con+1 (4), artificer’s lore (0.5), tinker (2.5). Lesser traits: nil

**Half Elf:** Cha+2 (4), +1 to two other ability scores (4), two skills (4). Lesser traits: Darkvision 60ft, fey ancestry, extra language.

**Half Orc:** Str+2 (4), Con+1(2), Intimidation skill (2), Relentless Endurance (2), Savage Attacks (2). Lesser Traits: Darkvision 60ft.

**Tiefling:** Int+1(2), Cha+2(4), 2nd level combat spell cast at 3rd level (3.5), Hellish Rebuke as a damaging power (0.5), cantrip(2). Lesser Traits: Darkvision 60ft, resistance to fire damage.

**Aasimar (DMG):** Wis+1(2), Cha+2(4), Light cantrip (2), 5th level Daylight once (4). Lesser Traits: Darkvision 60ft, resistance to necrotic and radiant damage.
Other information and predictions

These predictions relate to races as seen in the WOTC books to March 2017. If WOTC creates races that have a level adjustment (join at higher levels with fewer class levels) or race-class hybrids these predictions might not apply.

Monsters, Classes, and Races don’t use the same values: While I didn’t do a full analysis of monsters and classes it was pretty obvious that the same trait can have a different value if it is part of a monster or a class. These things do different tasks in the game so it is unsurprising. Damaging powers (including spells) cost more when part of a race (compared to within a class or non-combat spells in a race) and are always less potent than similar class abilities at a given level. This is probably to ensure niche protection for spell-casting classes and maintain the relative contributions to combat effectiveness of race compared to class. Think about it this way, if a Dragonborn’s breath weapon was as good as a wizard’s blasting spells, why would you be a wizard?

A race’s traits are roughly as valuable as one level of a class: a race is worth 12pt, and most class levels are worth around 10.5pt (earlier levels especially first level are worth more).

However combat related race traits are always not as effective as equivalent class features. This relates to the differing roles of races and classes. Your class really defines your role in the party and key progressions such as damage per round and hit points. Races add some perks but the intent seems to be races are about roleplaying.

Natural attacks will never do more than 2d6 at 1st: and more generally claws, bites, etc. will never be better than the weapons and attacks available to a fighter of the same level.

WOTC will not release races with Large, Multi-attack, or Extra Attack. Lot’s of monsters have multi-attack or are Large but as of now no canon races have these traits. Even the Firbolg giant-kin is not Large. This is because granting these in a race would increase the amount of damage that PC could do well above the bounded limits for PCs baked into the game’s math (exception: Large creatures that have no hands, or centauroids that can’t wield Large weapons are ok). Monsters need to do more damage because they have less access to healing, are often outnumbered, and have fewer powers to make it easy for the referee to control them. Similarly, damaging powers are very expensive when part of a race and never outshine class granted powers.

Many trait values are not static. For example feats are worth 6pt at 1st level but only 4pt at 4th. Spells in particular lose value as levels are gained. If you want a feat that grants spells take it at 4th level. Variant humans are flavorful but a smidge underpowered after 4th level.

Traits don’t always add arithmetically: One damage resistance is worth 0pt but two or more damage resistances can be very expensive.

Some traits are so weak they are essentially worth 0pt. my work predicted that some traits were zero point before the release of Unearthed Arcana Waterborne Adventures wherein the designer’s confirmed they used zero point traits which they call ‘ribbons’. Canon races will likely never have more than 6 of these ‘ribbons’. The current record holder is the Drow with 5.

Darkvision is a 0pt trait: Many feel darkvision is too useful to be 0pt. After-all there is a Darkvision spell and spells are worth points. I felt the same way. As I proceeded with the analysis I tried to keep some point cost on darkvision, but then I processed the Half-Elf. This race contains a total of +4 to ability scores (4 x 2 = 8pt) and 2 skills (2 x 2 = 4pt). The prices for skills are backed by a lot of evidence. 8 + 4 = 12, no points left over for the other traits. Since the other Half Elf traits, darkvision, Fey Ancestry, and Extra Language, aren’t going to be negative they all must be zero. I guess that WOTC’s designer’s felt that with so many ways to circumvent normal darkness available Darkvision just wasn’t that much of an advantage.

A race will never grant more than one feat at first level.

The aarakocra will be the only race that flies at first level from WOTC: Care must be taken in this edition of D&D when allowing flying speeds at 1st level. The levels at which PHB only characters can gain good access to Flying is 6th. It is telling that the aarakocra was barred from official organized play sessions; so are they really canon? I suspect the influence of Sasquatch Game Studio, WOTC’s collaborator on the EEPC. I think flying characters are no problem but WOTC probably writes official adventures without low level fliers in mind.

Example New Race: Elf, Aquatic
Medium Humanoid (Elf) Speed 25ft (-4) Swim 35ft (0.5)
Languages: Elvish, Common and Sahuagin.
Elf traits (PHB23) (6).
Subrace traits: Dex+1, Con+2 (6). Amphibious (PHB305) (2). Mask of the Sea: you can attempt to hide even when you are only lightly obscured by seaweeds, silt, and other natural underwater phenomena (as per Mask of the wild PHB24) (F 1.5). Proficient in trident (0.5). Total 12.5 (near enough)
Lesser Traits 3: Spear proficiency (0), Extra language (0), Swim Speed (0)
Notes: This version of aquatic elf is based on the 2e version from the Book of Elves and the Monstrous Manual for that edition. Interestingly, these two sources are somewhat inconsistent. This subrace has been extensively play-tested as a key character in the author’s home campaign.

Breaking the Limits
D&D is designed to support humanoids of Small or Medium size and low power as PCs. The reverse engineered race creation system is bound by these limits. Characters in fantasy novels, myths, and folklore are not. Clearly separated from the reverse engineered system in my book are ways to re-purpose existing rules to allow larger, Tiny, non-humanoid, and higher power creatures as PC races while being fair to those playing PHB races. For example I repurposed the Inspiration system to balance the inconvenience of playing a race without hands. I also re-purpose the rules for feats and multi-classing to allow more powerful races. If you are intrigued, check out my free book.
Moana Movie Review

by Andrew Moshos

Ohhhhhhh, who lives in a pineapple under the sea, Dwayne The Rock Johnson! Absorbent and yellow and porous is he? Dwayne The Rock Johnson!

dir: Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016

Another year, another Disney princess movie, another attempt from Disney to wring another billion or two out of the world through ticket sales and cross-promotional opportunities.

And this year’s princess is dark skinned! Hooray for diversity and equality and the melting pot and all that.

The fact that it’s “just” another princess flick is mocked within the flick itself, when the only other character chastises Moana by pointing out that she’s a girl, with an amusing sidekick, on some kind of journey (unspoken: that this is occurring in a Disney flick), so she’s a princess.

So, with that out of the way, are we meant to get over the fact that it’s another goddamn princess flick from the mega-entertainment Leviathan that is the Disney dream factory, and just sing along with all the songs?

Yes, yes we are.

I am cynical enough to see the naked self-aggrandising in something made so shamelessly with input from teams of marketers and sensitivity-focused PR flacks. I am not so cynical as to be incapable of enjoying it anyway. I don’t care about the ethnicity of the people doing to voices, I just care if what those voices are saying, singing or muttering is funny / entertaining / diverting / awful or whatevs.

So the fact that Disney employed a majority of people for the voices whose ethnicity has some kind of connection with the Pacific island nations instead of just getting Justin Timberlake and a bunch of other pasty Canadians to voice everything doesn’t really make that much of an impression on me. I don’t like a flick more or relate to the characters more just because they’re voiced by ethnically appropriate personnel.

What matters is that they be great. And I can’t really imagine anyone greater than The Rock at the moment in this world that we call our home. The Rock is great in ways that transcend merely having massive muscles or being great in terrible movies. To say that he is perfect to play the trickster trouble making demigod Maui in this wonderful flick would be, if possible, some kind of understatement.

The fact that he can also kill it in a singing role in a light comedic animation like this just means that he’s the kind of megastar who keeps finding new difficult things to be awesome at. The only way, the absolute only way he could have been any more awesome in the role would be if his massive character could have had a scene where, wearing a plaster
cast on his harm a day after breaking it, he found the time to break it just by flexing his massive muscles and said “Daddy’s got to go to work”.

There’s only really three characters in this flick, and one of them is just a chicken, and a very dumb chicken at that, one so suicidally stupid that the two main characters, Moana and Maui, spend much of their time trying to battle monsters, sail a boat in harsh circumstances and keep the chicken alive against all indications to the contrary. The thing doesn’t want to be alive, just let it go, I say. Let it go like some other Disney princess flick kept insisting we should do.

But that ain’t how I roll. I’m all about holding onto things no matter until the very end of time. And what I am holding onto right now is just how flat out enjoyable this flick is.

Of course Disney has a formula. Of course we know this formula better than we know the story of our own lives, which doesn’t seem to confirm to the neat narratives these flicks constantly serve up. I watched this with two glorious girls recently, and even they were calling out the stages of the plot before they happened. One of them sarcastically turned to the other and said “this must be the part with the Boss Fight” and she wasn’t wrong.

When two ten year old girls (just turned as of last weekend, in the case of one of them) can pick the story beats as they’re about to happen, you know you’re on a very unsurprising journey into the heart of something new but always familiar. Only a churl would churlishly complain, though, about the predictability of one of these flicks. If the end destination is unsurprising, then at least let’s enjoy the cool blue visuals and snappy songs along the way.

And there are plenty of both. It’s set mostly on the Pacific Ocean, so how could it not look glorious? Moana is perhaps a step forward in female representation in a Disney animated movie, and maybe she’s a good role model for young girls. It’s just that I’m not sure it means as much to them as it does to the parents or the makers at Disney who run the risk of getting sore shoulders from patting themselves on the back so much.

Maui makes the bigger impression, because he’s big, he’s fun, he talks a lot of shit, and he sings some pretty okay songs. He also has tattoos that change dependent on circumstance, with one particular tattoo version of him that seems to act as his good conscience, urging him to do the right thing when it’s the last thing he wants to do.

He has somehow managed to skronk things up on all the islands because of something he stole which made one particular volcano evil thingie go berserk. This releases some kind of dark corruption into the world which threatens all islands, but first Moana’s. Moana gets the clear indication from the sentient ocean and her dying grandmother that turns into a manta ray convinces Moana that the current tendencies of her people staying put where they are is a bad idea. She needs to get out there into the world, in order to save it, save herself, and save her people.

That’s a lot to put on a girl’s shoulders. But she has a determination to repeat a bunch of words at Maui, when she finds him, which will somehow compel him to help her, despite his being such a charming and handsome jerk.

And much adventure, action and yelling at each other along the way is going to have to happen, plus there are also going to be a bunch of songs. It’s probably not the best song, since the one Lin-Manuel Miranda sings himself about the islander folk setting sail and being voyagers is probably the ‘best’ song, with him being the renowned showtune-hip hop songwriter, but nothing is going to be as memorable as You’re Welcome, which The Rock sings fine in all his Autotuned glory. It’s big and brassy, just like him. There’s no way, though, that the song is going to latch onto the public consciousness the way the bloody songs from Frozen, well, one specifically, were drilled into our heads for months and years after the bloody film came out. It’s not that I think they’re not as great as previous ones, it’s just that they’re okay.

None of them, of course, hold a candle to the Tangled soundtrack *sniff*. Everyone forgets about how great Tangled was *sniff, sob* because now it’s all Moana this and Frozen that…
It’s all solidly predictably Disney fare, and that’s okay. I loved hearing Jemaine Clement singing as the nasty giant crab (I didn’t like how it was animated, but Jemaine is always a delight in each and everything he does, and even fills out the ethnic diversity requirements by being Maori), and I was sad when his time in the story came to a natural end.

In the end, it looks nice, there’s a nice dynamic between the leads, the story is interesting enough, dealing as it does with Polynesian myths and legends covering a whole bunch of islands all over the Pacific, and the ‘final’ resolution gently subverts the ‘destroying the main villain to save the world’ by revealing how all the world’s problems are self-created through shortsightedness and abject Islander stupidity on the part of the demigods (that was the message, right? That Samoans do bad things or something)

And the stupid chicken made me laugh with almost every stupid thing he did.

8 times the stupidity of the chicken seems to be a sustained argument against the Darwinian theory of evolution out of 10

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“Are you just trying to get me to talk about myself? Because if you are... I will gladly do so! In song form!” – you always deliver, Jemaine, always - Moana

Rating:

8 stars
Next Issue of RPG REVIEW

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Games from the Antipodes
RPGs and supplements from Australia and New Zealand

Hunter Planet, Lace and Steel, Supersquadron, Albedo, Terror Australis, Elric!, EPOCH and much more..

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