



Open Game Table: The Anthology of Roleplaying Game Blogs, Volume II

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The second anthology of roleplaying blogs by Open Game Table is much like the first in terms of presentation. The murky green cover with the barely distinguishable Victoria-era technician is replaced with an improved tone with advanced cyborg warriors. The internal artwork has improved somewhat as well, as has the general layout with much better use of white-space, although notably with more advertisements taking up the gaps. As per the previous edition a two-column justified serif font is used throughout and articles are specified by domain rather than absolute URLs. Consisting of thirteen chapters the well-bound softcover book has expanded as well, coming in at 160pp.

This issue - and one can certainly hope that there are more - begins with some insightful interviews with Dave Arneson (previously appearing in *Kobold Quarterly*) and Robin D. Laws, who takes some pains to explain some annoyingly common misconceptions of the Gumshoe system, which dovetails nicely with the following article by Justin Achilli on using narrative realism, albeit under the heading 'Realism Stinks'. Stretching analysis a bit too far, James Maliszewski tries to make a case for "Gygaxian Unnaturalism" suggesting that there is no contradiction between the Drow and *Dungeonland*. There is a slight education theme in the publication which is initially hinted at the interview with Dave Arneson, but becomes very evident in the article on 'Roleplaying Games as a Teaching Tool', which unfortunately turns out to be a fireside chat rather than a discussion of serious pedagogical issues.

The third chapter, 'Campaign Success and Failure' is particularly notable for a number of good articles. The article arguing for shorter campaigns comes with the very sensible advice 'tell a shorter story'. Note the creeping influence of narrativism, also very evident in the intelligent article by Scott Martin on 'Compensating for Failure', and later in the book on 'World Building is Storytelling', and most especially in the article 'Too Defined A Setting Can Prevent Player Creativity' (really, there's narrativism in a sentence!), 'Sharing Narrative Control' and 'Game Design The Collaborative Way' (it really means collaborative campaign design). The 'short story' plan also works very well with the advice by Phil Vecchione on 'The Rebound Game', to be held in between major campaigns.

The encouragement of post-mortem analysis by John Four is certainly welcome and it would be very handy if more GMs took up the advice - of course the problem being that the GMs who are not likely to take up post-mortem analysis are those who most need it! Players however might find attraction to Willo Palecek's 'Character Creation Tips and Tricks' and Lorne Mashall's 'Character Development: What's My Motivation?', both of which certainly is helpful for both character development and player development.

Like the last volume there is undue emphasis on fantasy RPGs in general and D&D in particular, although approval must be given to Jonathan Jacob's NPC 'Beret Tinglefoot, the Demon Tinkerer' who comes with game statistics and a write-up. There is a non-D&D specific article in this edition of the anthology - it's a spell failure table for *Castles & Crusades*. The over-emphasis on fantasy and D&D to the exclusion of other game systems and genres is not excusable, as much as did smirk at the comic suggestion of using D&D stupidest monsters in a campaign. More seriously, and in a more generic sense the collection of riddles by David Dolph is immediately useful, and is supplemented by a theoretical discussion which is an excellent structure.

Another peeve is the quantity of what is best described as rpg anecdotes. Sure, this is a compilation of 'blogs and this is what can be expected from individual 'blogs. But in a lot of cases the utility for other gamers is a bit thin or the

narrative insufficiently interesting to justify inclusion in an anthology. The story of a twenty minute freeform between Phil Menard and his seven-year old son, Nico has a modicum of cute, but there's nothing there that justifies the three page article. Other articles, like the previous anthology, are woefully under-developed, Neil Ellis' 'Engaging Your Players' for example noting quite correctly the requirement for 'pacing, timing, tension, and action' for engagement in an article that concludes without really completing any of the above (although the example provided was great).

Thus the second anthology has very similar strengths and weaknesses to the first. It is worth applauding the effort of the editor who has been sufficiently awake to grasp the significance of RPG 'blogs and their contemporary contribution to the development of the hobby. Whilst the articles contain a lot of brilliant ideas, the articles often do not follow this through to anything resembling conclusion. Whilst this is quite endemic to the medium itself, a more selective choice could make a difference. Likewise, one could certainly ask for a wider range of game genres and systems featuring in the pages, although the overwhelming majority of articles are 'systemless' and often 'genre-less'. Overall, this is a solid publication and one can certainly look forward to the third anthology.

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