Agon, In A Wicked Age and Best Friends Play Reports

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Agon

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

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

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

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

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

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

Agon is a great short, independent game, extremely well designed and with excellent capacity for longer-term

development. The only complaint that can possibly be levelled at it is the lack of elaboration for the more complex "battle" resolution for activities other than physical conflict. That would indeed be a challenge, and one that could fit quite well within the Hellenic genre.

In A Wicked Age

The game begins by consulting the Oracle; this sets a general setting for the game that will be played. The options are "Blood and Sex", "God-Kings of War", "The Unquiet Past" or "A Nest Of Vipers". I gave a thin smile when a player blurted out "Blood and sex!". From the Oracle entry one choose a four cards, which add characters, events, and background etc which will be incorporated into play. For example, 3 of Diamonds "A raving prophet, advocating self-mortification and deprivation of appetites". There is a random generator for those who don't have cards (http://www.lumpley.com/oracle/4oracles.php [1]) and a very, very cool collection of fan-developed material for other materials (http://www.random-generator.com/index.php?title=In_a_Wicked_Age [2]), which display how adaptable this story system is.

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

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

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

Best Friends

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

To this extent, it is a very specific game, and thus will be limited in its appeal, but wLi instruas Esperanton. * * hat it does, it does very well. It succeeds in conveying an environment of pettiness and backstabbing, as well as allowing the players to play out all the stereotypes as found in teen movies. This does mean that it will also have limited playability, and don?t expect to run a huge campaign based on it, but it is great for pulling out for an occasional

one-off session.

It is an antagonistic game, that requires players to actively conspire against each other, in that great back-stabbing tradition of being really nice to each other?s faces, whilst secretly trying to destroy them. If this isn?t what you are looking for, don?t try this game.

The greatest strength about this game is its character generation system. Without going into too much detail, characters have five characteristics, Pretty, Cool, Smart, Tough and Rich, and these are decided by the other players. In a very cute touch, the players decide what they hate the other player?s character for; for being tougher, or smarter, or richer etc than them. For each time you are hated by being better than someone else in a particular characteristic, that characteristic goes up by one. I would agree with the author here ? this is different, and I haven?t seen it before either.

The characters are then put in situations by the GM, through which they need to use their ratings to succeed. If the situation rating is more that the relevant characteristic, then unless they pay the penalty of a chip or token (to another player), they lose and take a penalty. The players are given only a limited number of tokens to start, and once gone, they cannot void penalties.
This makes the antagonistic nature clear ? players should ?nicely? engineer the situations presented to work to their best ratings and the other players weaker ratings. This is a skill in itself, and this will generally determine the winner.

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

Choices of dresses with appearance ratings

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

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

This does mean that the game requires a GM, and this does limit it compared against other ?antagonistic? games. Someone needs to create the situations and feed them to the characters. With a little more thought, and the requirement of the players to put more into the session, it could be turned into a GM-less system, but for an indie game that was created in a 24-hour window (for the ?Ronnie? award ? see http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php [3]), it is still very well done.

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

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

All in all, this is an excellent little game that would easily be able to fill in a session, and that I would thoroughly recommend. Just make sure that you are willing to play a stereotype teenage girl, and don?t take it too seriously.