Pyrrhic Victories and Other Rules in HeroQuest

by Lev Lafayette

Despite being in publication since 2003 (and prior to that, as Hero Wars, in 2000), HeroQuest is still somewhat unknown among many RPG games - some of whom confuse it with the HeroQuest board game. To put simply, HeroQuest is one of the most well-defined roleplaying system with an explicitly 'narrativist' creative agenda, with a consistent resolution system across all types of actions and conflicts. Character have abilities with ratings which are compared against other with contested d20 rolls; the results determine the degree of success or failure for the action.

The following are a set of short elaborations to the core rules which allow for Pyrric Victories, Hero Points for NPCs, Hero Points for General Narrativism, Hero Point Advances, Keywords and Broad Abilities, Limited Augments, and Equipment Bonuses.

Pyrric Victories

"Another victory like this and I shall be ruined"
- attributed to Pyrrhus via Plutarch, Battle of Heraclea, 280 BCE

The HeroQuest rules, as written, essentially allow for a victory or loss to one side or the other, in simple contests. Every action is an opposed test between two related abilities, with a default ability of 6 where there is none available and a default resistance of 14 where there is no active opposing force. Abilities may be augmented by related, but not primary, abilities in the test by dividing the ability score by 5 (by 10 in first edition HeroQuest).

The two values are then compared against other and d20 die roll determines the relative success or failure. If a modified abilities is above 20, then it receives a 'mastery' which can be used to bump a result up (a failure to a success) or down (a success to a failure). A roll fo a natural 20 is a fumble, and a roll of 1 is a critical. The degree of defeat is determined by the difference of the die rolls with penalty applied to resultant actions:

Complete - results differ by 3 levels (e.g., Critical vs Fumble). Dying, no actions possible.
Major - 2 levels (e.g. Success vs Fumble, or Critical vs Failure). Injured, -20 to appropriate actions.
Minor - 1 level (e.g. Success vs Failure). Impaired, -6 to appropriate actions.
Marginal Victory or tie (When results are equal, the lower die roll wins). Hurt, -3 to appropriate actions.

Whilst resolution is slightly quicker in second edition HeroQuest than in first, because augments are significantly more powerful, it should be possible to to speed up the process further in a manner which doesn't just require the expenditure of Hero Points.

The proposal here is for a "Pyrrhic Victory" rule, where the winning side in a simple context can extend their margin of victory by taking a loss on to themselves. The loss metric is a one-to-one value in terms of degrees of success. For example, if you have a marginal victory (a "level one victory") you could extend this two steps to a major victory (a "level three victory"), by also taking a minor defeat to yourself (a "level two defeat").

To give a simple example:

Rikku the Godlearner is fighting off a possession attempt by a Black Sun Wizard Ghost (it's best not to ask). As the Wizard attempts to possess Rikku, the Godlearner discovers a flow in the ghost's convictions, reflected in a minor defeat for the Wizard. Wanting to really put the ghost out of the contest, Rikku takes some spiritual damage himself, reflecting perhaps some self-doubt on his own convictions. Rikku takes -3 wound to 'spiritual actions', and extends the damage to the ghost from what would have been a -6 wound to a -20 wound. The ghost, sorely defeated, leaves.
From playtesting, such a rule speeds up multi-round conflicts significantly. But it will result with the victorious party being quite battered and bruised. As with Hero Points, if you want to scare the willies out the players, let NPCs make use of this rule as well.

Hero Points for NPCs

In HeroQuest a player has some control over the fate of their character through Hero Points. An unlucky dice roll does not mean that the character suddenly find themselves in the 'dead or dying' state, as if often the case in games that don't have such a meta-game mechanic and have to rely on the goodwill of the GM to 'fudge' the roll.

However, even HeroQuest does not have this sense of control for Non-Player Characters. This can mean some undesired results can come into play, such as the loss of a major character at an inappropriate time.

"OK, so you're in the hall to give tribute to Euglyptus The Fat, military governor of Sartar. There are at least twenty of his elite guard present. 'You have the gold?', he beams. 'Place it at my feet.'

"I shoot him", announces the Sartarite PC with some archery. "And I roll a '1', a critical! Roll defense..'"

"Umm... OK, definitely a surprise attack. He defends with his Dodge and calls for his guard - not that he needs to, they'll be on to you. And rolls a... ahh, a '20'. Critical failure. That's a complete success: 'Dying, no actions possible.' Hmm.. That'll be a major NPC out of action."

Certainly the Narrator could fudge the result, but it is far better to actually have rules that prevent this need (arguably in HeroQuest the Narrator could reframe the conflict). One very simple mechanism is to give NPCs Hero Points like PCs, depending on the character's importance to the story as a whole. A character who is named could have a one point, a recurring antagonist a couple, a major NPC could have up to five. Keep in mind it is not the power of the character, or their abilities, but their importance to the setting. A simple shepherd could have a few Hero Points if they were critical to the story, and a mighty warrior could have none if they were incidental.

As NPCs are Narrator-controlled, the use of the Hero Points is, of course, optional. If an unlikely event occurs, but the Narrator can work with it, they should go with it.

From playtesting there is additional feature of this rule: it makes players sweat.

Use Hero Points for General Narrativism

As written the HeroQuest rules (p23-24, second edition), allow a player to ?bump up? a result with Hero Points, but only for their own characters and sidekicks. One cannot change the results for other non-player characters (?supporting characters?) or for other player characters. The description provided is that the expenditure of a Hero Point represents when a player-character ?pushes himself to the limit, marshals previously untapped reserves, or pulls a rabbit out of his hat?. On the other hand, a ?bump down? can only be achieved by the use of a Mastery in an Ability.

But this is somewhat confused. Surely the ability of a character to find such inner strength depends on the character and not the player's meta-game currency? It is a function of their willpower, just as ?luck? is the character's feature in the game world, not the player's intervention ? and these would apply for NPCs as much as they would for PCs, and, when invoked, should receive a description as such.

Likewise the rules to ?bump down? results seem a little redundant. Any character with a mastery can use that mastery to bump down a result and a Hero Point to bump up their result ? which has exactly the same effect as spending the Hero Point to bump down their opponent and use the mastery to bump up their result. Thus the exclusion seems only to really apply in those situations where a player-character an ability below the level of a mastery and yet has Hero Points spare.

But again, one raises the questions ? are not Hero Points something that the player should be able to apply, to temporarily take control of the narrative and introduce new elements of their choice. It distributes the storytelling tasks,
provides the opportunity for the players to participate as Narrator and rewards the player for their advancement of a story through their character.

Hero Point Advances

The standard rules for HeroQuest suggest providing Player-Characters 3 hero points on character generation, 2-4 hero points per game session, three hero points at the end of a story arc, and a poll of players for "Most Valued Player" for an additional 3 Hero Points (p57, second edition). This is a substantial change from the previous edition which provided 3 hero points at the beginning of a character, 1-5 at the start of each adventures, and 1-5 hero points at the end of each "long, difficult, or multi-session adventure", along with additional hero points for "individual success, good roleplaying, or achieving personal goals" (p58)

As given the first edition rules are too generous, the second edition restrictive, but both are without strong guidelines. The following is offered as an alternative:

* One Hero Point for attending and participating in a session.
* One Hero Point for excellent roleplaying and game contribution within a session.
* One Hero Point for important lessons learned, whether the characters succeeded or failed.
* One Hero Point for "most valued player" in a session as chosen by the other players by secret ballot and optional preferential voting.

Keywords and Broad Abilities

In the second edition of HeroQuest, ?keywords? are clarified as representing either a package of diverse skills, or as an umbrella of related skills which can be raised as an group ability (p10), at an incredibly inexpensive 2 Hero Points for a single point of increase, and a 2x increase after that.

An Ability is defined as anything that can be used to solve a problem (p13), but of course, some abilities are far more innate and adaptable to a variety of situations than others. For example, ?Medicine? as an ability, is rather broad given the variety of specialisations that can come under it ? but it is not so broad to be an umbrella keyword term.

The suggestion here ? and it does require some work on the part of the Narrator to ensure that the abilities reflect the setting ? is to have multiple levels of abilities and with different levels of Hero Point costs to raise the Ability by +1. For example:

Profession, Vocation, Passion, or Mission; 4 Hero Points for a +1 gain, 12 Hero Points for a +2 gain. Effectively a ?keyword? for the character with a range of normal abilities under it.

Skill, Knowledge; The standard, 1 Hero Point for +1 gain, 3 Hero Points for +2 gain, 6 Hero Points for a +3 gain, 10 Hero Points for a +4 gain.

Specialisation. Rare but useful specialist knowledge and abilities. 1 Hero Point for a +2 gain, 3 Hero Points for a +4 gain. In some cases (e.g., dialects of language) cannot be higher than the skill or knowledge which it comes from.

Limited Augments

A massive change between the first edition of HeroQuest and the second was the changes to augments. In the first edition, any number of augments could be added to an ability at a rate of the augment's value divided by ten. In the second edition, a single augment can be applied to an ability in a contest, with an additional caveat that the augment is fresh, illuminates the character, creates suspense, and elicits an emotional response. A roll is made against an augment resistance table with variable results based on that result.

This new approach certainly resolves the issue in the first edition where ?character sheet scanning? was common as various attempts were made to introduce a range of augments into a situation in an effort to raise their overall ability.
However, it is not entirely convincing that their new method makes the game more enjoyable. A contest with a variable level of augmentation is simply another contest and with some counter-intuitive results, where the benefit gained is greater than the actual augmenting ability itself. Fortunately there is a Quick Augment optional rule which applies a simple Augment divided by five value.

Limiting an ability to a single augment could also be improved. Whilst it is a hat-tip towards simulationist approaches which HeroQuest explicitly rejects, there is also some narrative sense in applying limited but multiple augments. In this case, a character may apply one physical, one mental, and one social augment as additions to an ability (plus any bonuses from equipment, interactions, etc). The limitation is quite pragmatic? a character can exercise their Great Speed in a melee, but not their Great Speed and Immense Strength simultaneously. They may invoke their passion of Protect the Innocent, but not at the same time as their Hate Lunars? and so forth. In the scene the character invokes something important to the scene, but with a sufficient limitations that it is neither one-dimensional, nor overwhelming and possibly contradictory.

Equipment Bonuses

In the first edition of HeroQuest equipment provided bonuses, as an augment, to various abilities. As an example, weapons and armour gave specific bonuses (p78) ranging from +1 to +5 for light armour, +1 for a shield (shades of old Dungeons &Dragons!), and weapons and tools ranging from +1 to +5. In the second edition of HeroQuest, characters are assumed to have equipment appropriate to their ability; a Heavily Armored Knight at 18 has the same combat ability as Acrobat Swashbuckler at 18. However this is assuming that they have different equipment bonuses. This is not really how equipment bonuses work of course, but the totals do accurately reflect what the game is trying to do. There is a legitimate need to separate the two, and the second edition of HeroQuest does this appropriately as further equipment bonuses. However, this not apply directly with the initial ability levels. Instead a character should have an ability appropriate to represent their skill, and a second ability to reflect their equipment. In some cases having the skill without the equipment will place the character is very difficult situation just as having equipment without skill does not confer some special ability on the character.

This does give an appropriate potential longer-term advantage to the equipment-oriented character (such as the Heavily Armoured Knight in the above example). They have the option to purchase Armour, Shield, Helmet, Weapon etc, as separate items, each with their own augments to their base ability. The Heavily Armoured Knight can probably start with a disadvantage as they may be lacking in this full range and suffer a circumstantial penalty. The Acrobat Swashbuckler on the other hand, operating on raw skill and perhaps a single weapon, will probably start with all the equipment they need, but probably will not be able to expand to such a great range.

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