



Journey Planet

November 2016

Instant Fanzine

- Featuring -

Johnathan Baddeley, Owen Duffy, Simon English, CJ Hooper, TinaK, Helena Nash, Brian Nisbet, Alex Osbourne, Richard 'Smitt' Smithson, Maisie Stevenson, Lucy Szachnowski, Peter Taylor, Jamie Twine

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Pages 15, 19, 35, 37,

~Art Credits~

Ben Deguzman - Page 26; Ditmar - Pages 18 & 39; Cathy Magden - Page 32 (<http://elarine.deviantart.com/art/RPG-The-GameMaster-s-corner-52399638>); KOED.org - Page 7;

David Rogers - Page 12;

Still From the short D&D by S.J Tucker - Page 11; Vicky Twomey-Lee - Page 29;

~Editorial Team~

Esther MacCallum-Stewart, Selena Nash
James Bacon, Chris Garcia



~Introduction~

'It looks like this...'

Peter Taylor is one of my best friends. I've known him since I was about four, and since I was about 17, we've played roleplaying games together. In fact, a bunch of us have played games together and lived collectively through marriages, divorce, children, serious illnesses and the loss of Sid, the black cat who used to sleep in the room whilst we played and who eventually passed away of smelly old cat age.

Sid had another name; Meckins. Meckins was a chocolate tabby cat that our party found in Warhammer Fantasy Roleplaying. He liked to sleep in our rucksacks and voyage with us. He accidentally turned black somewhere near the start because we forgot the tabby bit, and Sid was probably hanging around scrounging snacks so we hung our visual reference on him. Oh, and he talked, which was useful, since he was basically our helper NPC. Stuck for what to do? Find some fish and give it to Meckins, if you can get him to wake up, that is.

Meckins is retired nowadays; he lives with Tilly in The Moot and keeps her safe. And there's another Meckins in town, a dopey black cat who lives at my house and likes to ask 'Got any fish?' on a regular basis. We've even given him a voice.

Roleplaying games change lives. One of the reasons Helena and I wanted to assemble these thoughts and memories into a *Journey Planet* was because people love to tell stories; about games they've played, characters they've been and obstacles they've overcome. We reckon that's why Instant Fanzine is so big this time – it's full of memories, ideas and advice.

Roleplaying games are both intensely serious and very silly. We get to be heroes in our own worlds, and we get to explore places and ideas we can never go. Pete's line to us all about the daftness of Cthulhu minatures 'It looks like this, only a lot bigger and you're all really scared', epitomised our groups' feeling that minatures were for amateurs, but there are multiple ways to play roleplaying games and guess what? None of them are 'better'; they are simply different.

We seem to be in dark times at the moment, and it's hard to see some of the more recent events in the 'real world' as anything other than overwhelming, threatening and harmful to the people we love and cherish. So we hope, reading this issue, that you can imagine, if you will, our swords out and our battlecries ready as we run at the leathery, apricot coloured hellbeast. If only it were so easy...

~Esther, Helena, Chris and James

James adds -

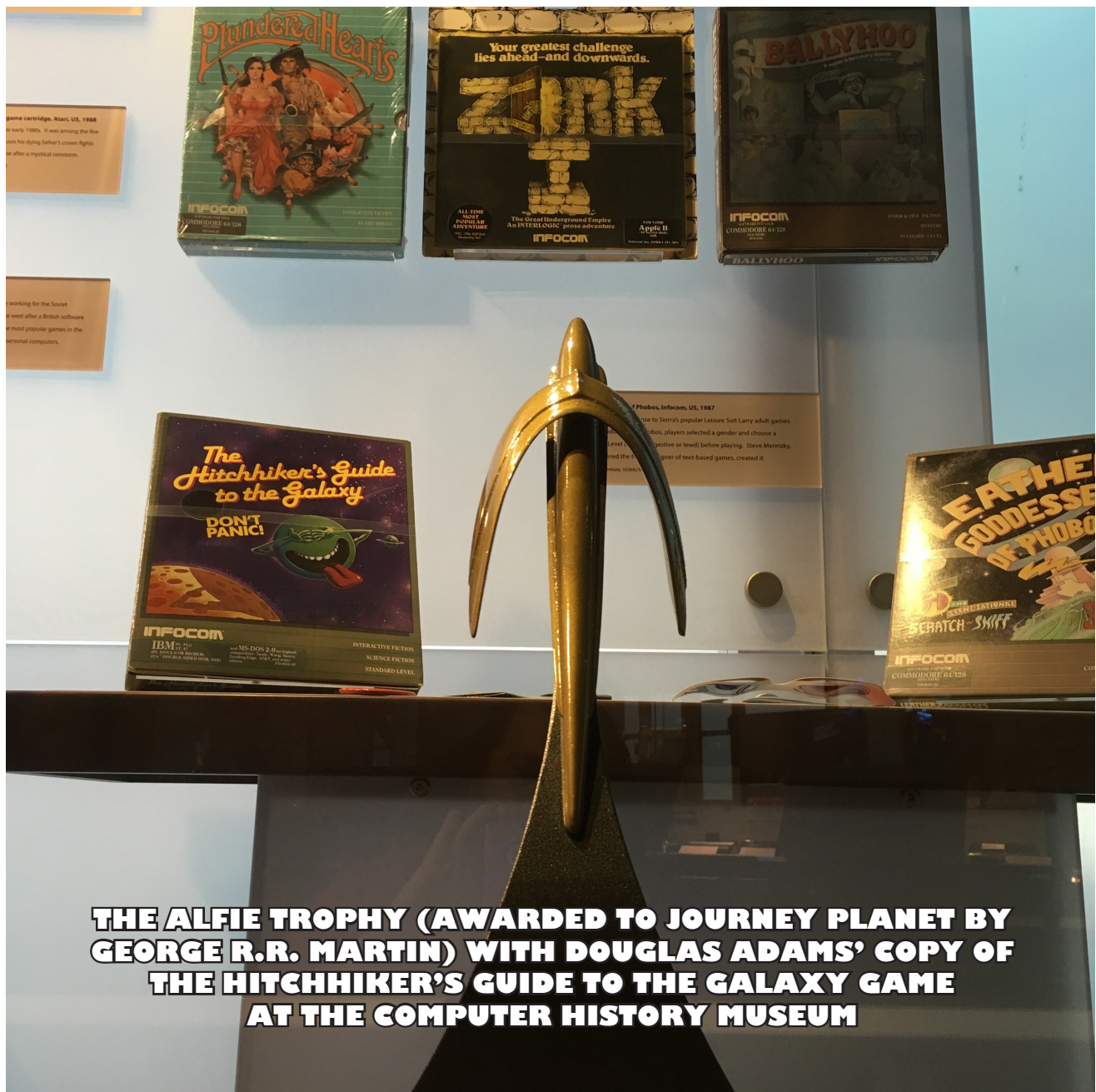
I was very pleased that Esther suggested this themed issue and pleased that Helena Nash came on board. I think that is one of the good things about *Journey Planet*, myself and Chris do not always need to be the main drivers nor possess all the knowledge.

I was struggling to contribute anything at all to this issue, for my own perception of gaming greys somewhat, and I lot it all in together. Occasionally I would have a moment of inspiration, like how we all played *Magic the Gathering* on our train and ferry trip to the 1995 Worldcon, or how I collected the *Star Wars* Collectable Card game, but these are not Role Playing Games, I would eventually remind myself.

Then when I was in Seattle, gosh that was some time ago now, I was in Bellvue, its a dreadful place, makes Milton Keynes look villagey, anyhow, there's a place called Bellvue Cross roads, which existed before the Acme Instant techno City nearby, and there is an older shopping centre, that contains a Half price Books where I found some awesome games, by Avalon Hill. One was about the Arab Israeli War, there was a Luftwaffe one, and one about the First World War, but these are strategy board games and not RPG's, so I was again diverging drastically from the subject.

I like to look at the boxes, and imagine it would be great to have a whole day to learn the rules and then play a game, but I have a zine article to write, and some con stuff to do, and it all seems so busy.

So I am grateful to my co-editors and all the contributors on this issue, it allows me to step into the Role Playing world, the nice one, not the one various work places have stolen for their own ends, and see what other people love and enjoy and want to write and talk about.



THE ALFIE TROPHY (AWARDED TO JOURNEY PLANET BY GEORGE R.R. MARTIN) WITH DOUGLAS ADAMS' COPY OF THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY GAME AT THE COMPUTER HISTORY MUSEUM

Images on Cover (Left-to-Right, Top-to-bottom)

Fate Core System, Conan Role-Playing Game, Discworld Role-Playing Game, The Palladium Role-Playing Game, Basic Fantasy Role-Playing Game, Melee the Eternal Adventure, Pathfinder Role Playing Game
All Flesh Must Be Eaten, Silver Age Sentinels, GURPS Supers, Star Trek: The Next Generation RPG
Invulnerables, Black Crusade, Mutant Year Zero, Doctor Who Role-Playing Game

Lettering

J = Judge Dredd, O = Paranoia, U =, R = Star Wars Role-Playing Game, N = RuneQuest, (3rd Edition)
E = RuneQuest (1st Edition), Y = Beyond the Supernatural

P = Champions, L = Marvel Super Heroes, A = Call of Cthulhu, N = Villains & Vigilantes, E = Robotech, T = Rifts



Jonathan Baddeley

"What was the first game you played?"

When I was at college doing my A-Levels I joined a general gaming group. I'm not sure if second edition *D&D* was the very first but it's the one I remember most vividly. We had a habit of starting stuff that petered out, which this did. But I did get to play a shedload of *Battletech* and *Star Fleet Battles*.

"Who did you play with and do you still game?"

I have two current roleplaying groups. I have a weekly roleplaying group I've been in for about 12 years on Monday nights, which is convenient as my partner's weekly group is also on a Monday! We play with a few other groups in a London pub and rotate games with breaks in between for board gaming sessions or just a nice meal.

The second group is an occasional Sunday afternoon group with my partner and a group she has played with for many years. With my partner's illness it has been sojourned for a year but restarts in a couple of weeks. We usually play about once per month and it is an ongoing *Heroquest* game. Our character group has been becoming more instrumental in world politics and there is much diplomacy and discussion.

"What's your favourite system?"

I don't really have a favourite. I tend to prefer simple ones with stat plus skill plus dice roll. Diceless narrative systems weird me out.

"And your worst?"

I wrote to the creator of the *C.O.R.P.S* system to tell him how much I hated his over-complicated system after the third time my GM told me I hadn't done the maths right. The author was upset I didn't like it, as if it were my fault. I took the lesson that self-publishing often means unpublishable.



Owen Duffy

What was the first game you played?

My first RPG was *Vampire: The Masquerade*, which I started playing in high school. I was really drawn to its mix of power, intrigue and sexuality - although taking the rulebook into school did get me into trouble.

Who did you play with and do you still game?

I played with a group of similarly geeky friends. These days I play more board games than RPGs. The demands of grown-up life mean it's difficult to set aside time for a proper RPG session. I do play online through Google Chat occasionally, though. Our group has recently played teen supernatural romance game *Monsterhearts*, Swedish dark fantasy game *Symbaroum* and gritty superhero sim *Cold Steel Wardens*.

What's your favourite system?

I'm a huge fan of Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco*. It perfectly encapsulates anarchic, farcical, darkly comic movies and fiction. It's also one of the few games that can be as much fun to watch as it is to play. I played it at the UK Games Expo and we ended up with a little crowd of people spectating!

And your worst?

I don't enjoy *D&D*, *Pathfinder* or similar systems. I tend to gravitate towards games that prioritise story over system.

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

I tend to GM more than I play characters. At the moment there's a non-player character in my *Monsterhearts* game I'm really enjoying. She's Binkie, a member of the "popular" girls' clique who's attracted to a same-sex player character. She's torn between her very conventionally feminine appearance and personality and her emerging orientation, which would completely ostracise her from her peer group if they discovered it.

But the character she's getting into a relationship with just wants to use her as a weapon against the leader of the group. She's caught between prejudice and manipulation, and I don't think it's going to end well for her. I'm intrigued to see how her storyline plays out.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

It gives players the opportunity to step into another character's personality and experience the world through their eyes. Sure, that can involve a bit of simple monster-slaying, but it also lets people explore another person's reality. You can deal with situations and attitudes that you'll never encounter in real life, and I think you can become a better person for it.

As kids we're told to put ourselves in other people's shoes, and RPGs are a powerful way to develop that kind of empathy. If we can understand the world through the perspective of a level nine elven rogue, we can try to understand what it might be like to be another ethnicity, gender, social class or sexual orientation.



Simon English

What was the first game you played?

That would be *D&D*, aged 13. The first game I really remember enjoying as a collaborative, creative activity was *Marvel Superheroes (FASERIP)*, and the first game I really remember playing and thinking “whoa, now we are really playing characters in a narrative” was *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

Who did you play with and do you still game?

A friend at school initially, then various groups of friends over the years. I still game, midweek, probably 4 out of every 6 weeks; one member of the group I'm in and I have been role-playing together for 25 years.

What's your favourite system?

Torg, every time, it is the best system I've ever run for delivering cinematic, wide-screen role-play. It also has one of the best meshings of game mechanics with game background that I've encountered - I am hugely excited about its return this year. I'd also put a big shout out to *Ars Magica*, *Mutant City Blues*, *Shadow of the Demon Lord* and *Godbound*.

And your worst?

In terms of what I've *actually* played I would have to say I can't actually remember the system, it was a convention game, cyberpunk genre. I think it was a GDW system; heroic reffing could not save it from abysmal players. 1st ed. *Mage* is a great background, but the rules are a little fragmentary to say the least.

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

I'm really enjoying the character I'm playing in a long-running (5+ years) FRP game; longevity of play really makes a character come to life.

I once witnessed the worst game (*Werewolf: The Apocalypse*) I have ever seen, where the entire session was taken up with ordering at a fast-food restaurant and going on a travelator - it was tedium personified.

In my long-running Norse-inspired-sort-of-*Ars Magica* game, one of the players reduced all of us to tears with a moment of incredible pathos and emotion - that was really incredible.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

I think it's a really unique hobby, that creates very collaborative and memorable experiences. I think it's 10,000 times better when us white, male, straight gamers stand up against the casual sexism and non-inclusivism that the majority of gamers don't want to accept exists.

CJ Hooper

What was the first game you played?
Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay.

Who did you play with and do you still game?
Ben Burston - now larp royalty
Currently we do Cthulhu larp with Disturbing Events (if I may give them a free plug).

What's your favourite system?
For tabletop I'm a big fan of old *Warhammer* still, before it was repackaged and boxed up. Simple rules for a simple time. Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* works for me too.

And your worst?
Rolemaster. Anything that sacrifices fun for tables shouldn't be allowed.

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?
There was once an elven wardancer who lost an appendage in a shark attack over a magic pool....
But more memorable than that were Agent Frank Jones and Agent Elliot Vincent, played by two very good friends of mine in an ongoing series of Project Twilight. They were based on Norm from *Cheers* and a very naive Agent Cooper...Very naive...

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?
The acting, the differing characters and personalities, but above all the investment in adventurers facing danger and excitement, the risk and the fear... So much fear...



TinaK

What was the first game you played?
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles - I think I played a sparrow or something similar and it was a great evening, with lots of laughs.

Who did you play with and do you still game?
I started playing with friends that I've long since lost touch with. I still game, at least twice a week, with different groups of friends and I've played loads of different systems over the years.

What's your favourite system?
I don't really have one, as long as you don't need me to remember some complicated combat rules, or a whole list of spell variables, then I tend to enjoy the game. I'm more in it for the story than how to munchkin a character.

And your worst?

However, not keen on *D&D*. I've never really been a fan, and can't stand the newer versions.

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?
Aelish, a thief in a homebrew *Conan* game many years ago. I'm sure I have some memories, but my recall is rubbish.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?
The escapism from everyday life, the friends, the laughs, the huge variety, and the amazing creativity from players and GMs alike.

Helena Nash

What was the first game you played?

Basic *D&D*, module B2: The Keep on the Borderlands. My dad ran it for me, my brother and my mum. I must have been 11 or 12. We'd seen the advert for the game on the back of a British Marvel comic. Dad ran that game for us for something like 5 years, expanding the map, adding more characters and spinning off the original forays down the Caves of Chaos into a massive campaign.

I distinctly remember that we only won our very first combat - a wilderness encounter with a flock of stirges - because I'd mixed up the 10' pole my cleric was actually carrying with a d10-damage polearm.

Who did you play with and do you still game?

My family to begin with. Then my brother and I gradually inducted friends from secondary school. From then on any new friends I made were usually drawn into our widening gaming group (or quietly dropped if they didn't play. I'm kidding. I treated them with casual indifference until they drifted off).

There was a golden period of my life, once I'd been to a few UK games conventions, where my roleplaying circle seemed to have spread across much of the country. These days, with my friends' spare time increasingly occupied by family and work, gaming sessions seem to happen once or twice a year rather than every Monday night, which is a shame.

What's your favourite system?

Quite possibly MSH (*Marvel Super Heroes*). Simple, fun and perfectly in tune with the fast and furious style of 1980s Marvel comics. The FASERIP stats of most characters from the Marvel Universe are burnt into my brain. Case in point, J Jonah Jameson's Endurance rank of Typical (6), "Able to tolerate New York in August." Any system which can cover all magic in two compact pages (courtesy of Dr Strange, natch) is A-OK by me.

Also *WFRP* (*Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*), for the incredibly rich world and atmospheric adventures, especially the *Enemy Within* campaign. Death on the Reik in particular managed to hit that sweet spot between 'fantasy-horror' and low-rent 'mud and scabs' adventure.

And your worst?

Deadlands. Any system that uses dice, poker chips and playing cards to determine results is on a hiding to nothing with me. I'm surprised they didn't throw in rock-paper-scissors and a magic 8-ball as well. I confess that my recollection of the game is tainted by a particularly tedious introductory session, crammed with dull NPCs standing around in general stores and saloons, waiting for a plot that seemed to be too shy to come out and play.

Champions. I played it twice with different groups. On both occasions I found it to be a joyless experience, partly due to the bean-counting 'spend half a point on armour' character generation system, but also because the ref and players weren't dyed in the wool superhero fan(atic)s like me. Consequently their characters were somewhat less than heroic in their behaviour. But this was the early 90s, so maybe they were in tune with the comics of the time and not me.

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

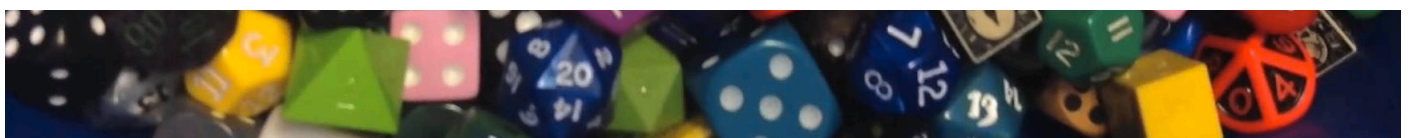
Johnny Lightning, the sultan of speed (*TORG*). Or possibly transgender wage mage Patsy Pan (*Shadowrun*). No, Major Schreck, the skeleton SS officer (*Whispering Vault*). Oh, I don't know. As a ref, I enjoyed playing practically every Marvel superhero in a long-running *What If?* campaign I ran called Seconds. My Hank McCoy was pitch-perfect.

Unrepeatable memories? Designing a trio of evil PCs for a Dirty Dozen style *AD&D* game. They each had an appallingly offensive name which I cannot repeat here. My only defence is that I had been reading a lot of *Viz* and listening to Derek and Clive at the time. They were funny names though.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

Um, doing things that I will never, ever get to do in real life, that's pretty great. Beating the bad guy, saving the day, getting the glory. I'm not ashamed to say that looking cool, even if it's only in my head and in the heads of my friends, is a big buzz for me when gaming. Apart from that, I love getting the genre of a game right, whether it's dying tragically in battle in *Pendragon* or getting taken hostage by a bunch of mooks in a pulp game.

As a ref, running a game that my friends will still be war-storying about years later can be a wonderful experience, and a real boost to the ego.



Brian Nisbet

What was the first game you played?

Redbox D&D, sometime around 1984.

Who did you play with and do you still game?

Back then, my brother and his friends. None of them still game, sadly, albeit we did play various version of D&D all the way through school. I do still game, of course. More boardgames than RPGs these days, but not for lack of trying.

What's your favourite system?

This is always difficult, but, with a gun to my head, *Mage: The Ascension*

And your worst?

GURPS (which was tricky back when I demoed for SJ Games!)

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

Lir, a member of the Dublin Chantry of House and Clan Tremere. Lir was the first long term LARP character I ever played and it was so much fun to really feel like I was him! I always wore a poloshirt and I have delicious memories of the first time a Ventruie tried to use Presence on me, only for me to reveal the blue cord of Pavis of Foul Presence under the neck of my top.

There was also the time my Chantry Regent saved my unlife. The LARP took place on the fourth floor of an old building in Trinity College, Dublin. The stairs ran in a circular fashion against the wall of the building. I had been pushed from the top floor (it had been made very clear the stop at the end would be deeply unpleasant) and myself and the GM were running down the stairs with the GM very loudly repeating "He's falling, he's falling, he's falling." Suddenly, on the final flight, a very soft but clear voice simply said "He stops." Clear diction, excellent timing and a little Movement of the Mind saved me and utterly silenced the GM and every other player watching.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

The stories, over and over the stories. The ability to get inside one, to influence it, as either player or GM, to know that nothing is set in stone and that everything is possible.

The characters, over and over the characters. To be so inside a character that you are thinking as them, reacting as them, emotions raw and close to the surface, entering a whole new world.

The people, over and over the people. To share moments of joy and fear and victory with others. To look around a table or a room at your community, at your people, knowing they're with you on the journey, crafting new memories of so



Alex Osborne

What was the first game you played?

D&D.

Who did you play with and do you still game?

A schoolmate called Edward Garrie. Unfortunately, we lost contact some 20+ years ago but he took me to the weekly Finchley Games club and the rest, as they say, is history.

What's your favourite system?

Ooh, it's gotta to be Torg! So crazy...so epic.

And your worst?

That Vampire 'Werewolf' offshoot thing - lame assed emo power gaming. Ugh!

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

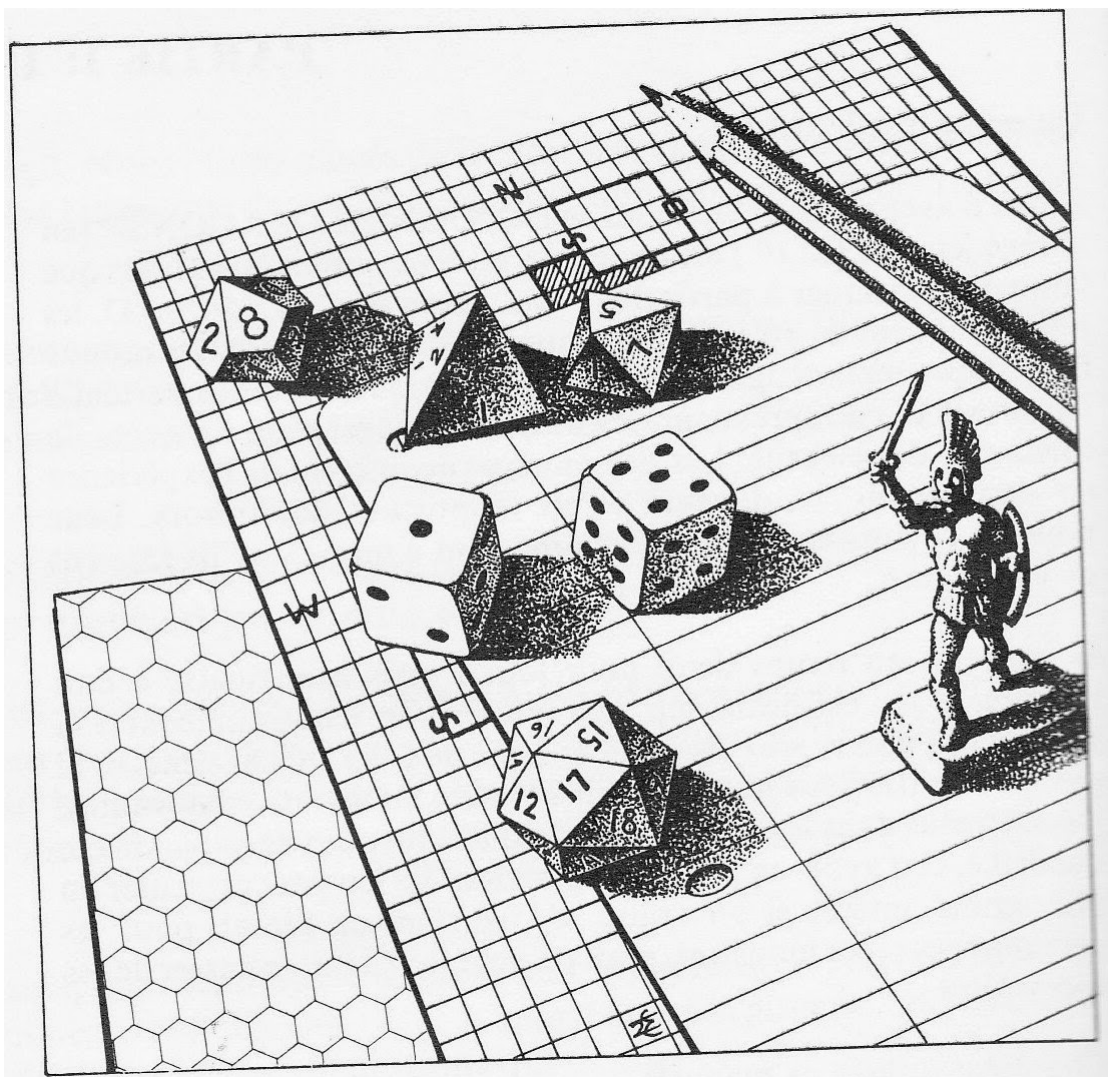
You can't ask that question. There have been too many wonderful memories and I adore every character and bunch of players associated with them to be able to choose just one.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

It's the most free flowing form of imaginative creativity I've ever experienced. With the right group of people you can form the most fabulous worlds and create wonderful stories, where the only limits are how far you're willing to give yourself over to the parts you play in those stories - that and your ability not to roll like a dog (DICE rolls, before you get any funny ideas, though I can do a decent German Shepherd, if push comes to shove).

It's made me laugh till I cried and, occasionally, if the stars are aligned correctly and the GM is truly gifted, it has made me cry till I laughed.

Plus, you know, there's usually beer.



Richard 'Smitt' Smithson

What was the first game you played?

The first RPG I ever played was *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, 1st ed, probably around 1993. I planned a huge, months long city campaign. The first thing the PCs did was get themselves in trouble with the law and flee the city...

Who did you play with and do you still game?

I remember harassing my wargaming mates into playing in the school cafeteria. Of that group of six I think I and one other still play RPGs.

What's your favourite system?

Currently, almost anything 'powered by the apocalypse'. *Apocalypse World* and many of its descendants have done more for my love and understanding of RPGs than anything that came before.

And your worst?

There was some 90's combat-centric SciFi game that was super-crunchy. When you shot someone you had to consult tables which featured taking into account cross-winds. Total garbage. But I did play a massive tiger-alien of human level intelligence, with a gun on my back.

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

Dan Edwards is an AstroTurf salesman in the style of Alan Partridge in our on/off *Unknown Armies* campaign. He once tricked a terrorist on a plane by conjuring an advert onto the passenger TV screens. It was a highly confusing, self-indulgent black and white short film that turned out to be an advert for a perfume called 'Distraction, by Dan Edwards'. Then I hit him.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

There is nothing else like it. Get a good group with the right game and it's like creating music together. Just wonderful.



Maisie Stevenson

What was the first game you played?

Dungeons & Dragons. Maybe Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. One of the two. I played a cleric.

Who did you play with and do you still game?

A bloke I used to fancy from school. He didn't fancy me; he fancied my mate. But she didn't want to play. I still game and play anything anyone offers me.

What's your favourite system?

Over The Edge. It's got 4 dice and is incredibly rules-light and that's what I like.

And your worst?

*Ars Magica. Too complicated by half. You play more than one ***** person. What's that about?*

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

I liked playing Professor Lazarus in a *Mutants and Masterminds* game. Professor Lazarus had an alter ego called Southpaw who was a monkey. Obviously they were both monkeys. I think of Professor Lazarus as a sort of cross between Wolverine and Deadpool. He was a reluctant hero who was only a good guy because of the company he kept. My favourite memory is of him throwing his own faeces at an annoying reporter.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

I like the sociability of it and the chat. Which is why I'm often not invited back because I derail games with my chat.

Lucya Szachnowski

What was the first game you played?
AD&D.

Who did you play with and do you still game?

I played with a group that met near Rochester in the mid 1980s. Although I do still game, I haven't seen that group for decades.

What's your favourite system?

Favourite system or favourite background? My favourite background is probably *Call of Cthulhu*. The system is probably one of my favourites too, but it is a bit old fashioned these days. Generally now I prefer something a little more flexible and story-driven.

And your worst?

The system I have actually played and hate the most is *Phoenix Command*. There are other games I've heard of that I wouldn't even want to try playing.

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

The character I played for the longest amount of time was an elven fighter/magic-user in an AD&D campaign that took her from 1st level up to something ridiculous. But I've played too many characters and too many games over the years to say which was the best ever and which experience was the best ever.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

It is much more immersive, creative and sociable than watching a movie or reading a book.

“So, what you’re saying is all quantum physicists are Paladium players?”

Chris Garcia to a very confused Brian Green

Peter Taylor

What was the first game you played?
Fighting Fantasy, Puffin 1984

Who did you play with and do you still game?

Primary school friends. Not with those same people, but I'm still gaming with some of the same people from when I ran my first Cthulhu games in 1986.

What's your favourite system?

System as in rules mechanics? Or as in setting? Favourite setting - probably *Call of Cthulhu*.

And your worst?

System not setting - *MERP*, which I remember as being far too complicated.

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

I'd say hapless Jedi Knight Owen Etherson from 1st edition *Star Wars* RPG. He was overweight, liked his food, and had a bad habit of adding the adjective 'Space' to everyday nouns as if he were in a sixties sci-fi film. The latter didn't play well with the GM.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

It remains a creative, interactive and fun hobby capable of producing amazing stories with much better pictures than film, tv, etc.

Jamie Twine

What was the first game you played?

Call of Cthulhu (if we don't count playing FF books on me tod as a kid). I was killed in the first scene in which I appeared. A useful lesson to learn early when playing CoC.

Who did you play with and do you still game?

I played with a group of 5 - 7 other people known by many as The Cuffley Mafia. I still game but less frequently as jobs, house moves and the birth of miniature roleplayers has scattered us all across time and space.

What's your favourite system?

Probably *Call* or *Trail of Cthulhu*.

And your worst?

I'm not a great fan of *D&D* but any system can be good if run by an imaginative GM with a reasonable attitude to rules (and ignoring them when they are not fun, that's really important).

What's the best character you ever played and do you have any un/repeatable memories?

My favourite character was a super-powered PI called Donnie Blackmore in an enormous game of *Aberrant* that brought together several different RPing groups as different teams of heroes/villains. It was interesting seeing the different groups' takes on comic characters. We were definitely the four colour straight-arrow heroes.

And above all, what's so great about roleplaying that you want to share with us?

It's silly fun and a good chance to stretch your imagination a bit - it's also best when nobody takes it too seriously.



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Being a Little Person in a Big Bad World: Politics and Investigation by Ambrose Hall

Battle game *Memoir '44* is widely regarded as one of the classics of board gaming. Set during the climax of the Second World War, it recreates the allied invasion of Western Europe - a struggle that would bring an end of the Nazi regime at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. It's award-winning, critically acclaimed and popular with players, and its engaging, respectful presentation of the conflict even saw it recognised at the official game of the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings.

But I'll never play it.

My experience with the game only got as far as a quick rules explanation. When the friend who was teaching the game told me: "And these are your SS units," I knew I couldn't go any further. Even in this harmless, abstract form, the idea of commanding forces responsible for war crimes made me more than uncomfortable. It gave me a sense of revulsion in the pit of my stomach strong enough that I knew we'd have to pack the game away and find something else to play that afternoon.

Memoir '44 could never be said to be sympathetic towards fascism. It focuses on the practicalities of battle rather than ideology, and historians and military veterans alike recognise war games as one of the most effective tools for learning about conflict. So why should a board game, of all things, spark such a powerful emotional reaction in me? Why, when I've been able to read books or watch films about the darkest aspects of the war, did I balk at the prospect of playing a game covering the same subject matter?

Perhaps I'm over-sensitive, but to me, games are an intensely personal way of stepping into someone else's shoes. Just like film or literature, they're an opportunity to spend some time experiencing the world from someone else's perspective - and there are some perspectives I'd rather not experience.

This idea of adopting a viewpoint is most pronounced in roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Call of Cthulhu* or any number of similar titles where players take on the identity of a character, speak their words and decide on their actions. But even in games which don't expressly prioritise roleplaying, the question of exactly who we're supposed to be while we're playing is at the heart of many games' emotional appeal, and it's the thing that most clearly differentiates games from other forms of fiction.

What I really enjoy is sinking my teeth into some juicy investigation and politics plot.

Take the massively popular and ludicrously lucrative collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering* as an example. It casts players as powerful, dimension-hopping mages doing battle using potent spells and dangerous creatures, all represented by cards which players can use to build customised decks. On a mechanical level, it's a game of maths, stats, chance and strategy. But take a step back from raw mechanisms and you find a game that gives its players an impressive degree of scope for personal expression.

Do you favour violence and aggression, aiming to kill your opponent quickly before they've had a chance to get their battle plan in motion? Do you prefer patience and restraint, playing the long game with a defensive, controlling strategy? Do you harness all of your magical energy to summon a single, devastatingly powerful creature to trample your opponent into the dirt? Or do you build an army of smaller minions, swamping your enemy with the weight of sheer numbers?

The process of concocting, building and honing a deck takes some serious thought, and the result says something about a player's personality.

This personal connection to the game is something that its designers have recognised and sought to encourage. The card *Demonic Pact*, for instance, gives a range of powerful benefits while it's in play, but after three turns it causes them to lose the game. It's a Faustian pact, and the onus is on the player to either end the game or find a way to negate

its effects before they pay the ultimate price. It's fun, it's dramatic, but crucially, it engages the player in the fiction of the games universe, making them a character in a story rather than a faceless card-shuffler.

That level of engagement isn't confined to *Magic*. The co-operative disease-fighting game *Pandemic* creates a similar sense of characters. Players become specialists with an organisation similar to, but legally distinct from, the Centre for Disease Control, battling to contain and eradicate outbreaks of different diseases around the globe, and a big part of the game revolves around discussions within the group, determining how best to respond to developing threats in different parts of the world.

Crucially, though, each player takes on an individual role on the team, and each role comes with its own special ability which can assist their efforts against worldwide plague. They might be particularly adept at treating the infected, exchanging genetic information or conducting research on vaccines. It means that every player has a distinct responsibility on the team, and in the right circumstances, any player can be the hero who prevents a disastrous epidemic or develops an elusive cure to a particularly virulent virus.

The result is that players feel an intense connection to the character they control, and that's something that was raised to another level in the follow-up *Pandemic Legacy*. It uses the same formula, but adds a rich, ongoing story mode, with characters who develop new abilities or suffer psychological scars as the campaign plays out from one game to the next. Once you've spent time with a character, built a personal history with them, shepherded them through triumph and disaster, there's an emotional investment that makes it hard to let go. Maybe that's why, in spite of the fact that any player can take control of any character, players in my group found themselves taking on the same roles over and over again.

Of course, the potential to slip into a role depends to a great extent on the depth of a game's setting. A game like *Descent*, a dungeon-crawling adventure game with a detailed world to explore and variety of customisable characters to control, has greater scope for RPG-like levels of immersion than purely abstract games like draughts, chess or *Connect Four*.

But even where a game lacks any kind of fictional hook, it can still subtly change players' personalities. When we sit down to play, we become slightly different people. The rules that govern our interactions change. We're less concerned with appearing nice or accommodating than we are with winning a contest of skill or intelligence. We may not become wizards, elves or warriors from the distant future, but we do turn into more competitive versions of ourselves - a process that seems to scratch a universal human itch.

Perhaps that's why some of the most enduring friendships of my life have been formed around games. When we step outside of ourselves for the purpose of play, we ironically show sides of our personality that we normally keep concealed. When we do that together, there's an honesty and a vulnerability that can form the foundations of lasting relationships.

I was introduced to tabletop roleplaying at nineteen, by a bunch of people who'd been around for much longer than me. I never had those awkward early-teen experiences others report of playing whatever dubious offering the only kid in the group who could be bothered to read the *D&D* rules came up with, or putting up with someone's crap power-gaming little brother who insists on playing a were-badger death mage abomination (probably). Instead, I had people who'd done all that awkward bit so I didn't have to, picked the best bits, and learnt from their mistakes. In short, I was spoilt. So maybe that's why I've become such a fussy player, or maybe tastes differ, and there's nothing inherently wrong with a dungeon crawl. Either way, fighting focused games are just not what floats my boat. What I really enjoy is sinking my teeth into some juicy investigation and politics plot.

The first game I ever played was the much loved *WFRP* (*Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*) game, *Shadows Over Bogenhafen*, which whilst including the deliciously crunchy Warhammer crit table, was mostly an investigation. I think. I was young, I was a bit stoned, but I have some fond if hazy memories of running around the city trying to figure out what the hell was going on. One embarrassing chaos warp gate later, I met a GM who had a serious addiction to investigation and politics, and a knack for weaving intricate backgrounds, I switched joints for beer, and have an almost complete recollection of this golden age of my experience as a roleplayer. Our games varied from White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade*, to *Rolemaster*, to *Marvel*. My favourite was the *Vampire* game, with its lovingly crafted complex plot, three dimensional NPCs, and original world. The attention to detail took my breath away. Although there was plenty of ongoing lower level plot, we derived as much fun from slotting together the pieces of ancient vampire family trees, and the related web of grudges and obligations that made up the over-arching plot, as we did playing at city politics and taking care of business for our immediate superiors. There was a tremendous feeling of wheels within wheels, of strings being pulled at all levels, which made the world dynamic and exciting. Being the little guy really was the most interesting thing to be, against such a rich backdrop.

That's my ideal. I'm only a mere mortal, so I don't think I'll ever quite touch it as a GM. Instead it's something to aspire to. What it showed me was the value of a complex, dynamic world, peopled by rounded NPCs, each with their own history and motivations. I think, for games that revolve around politics and investigation, the NPCs are key, because what makes those sorts of stories interesting are people.

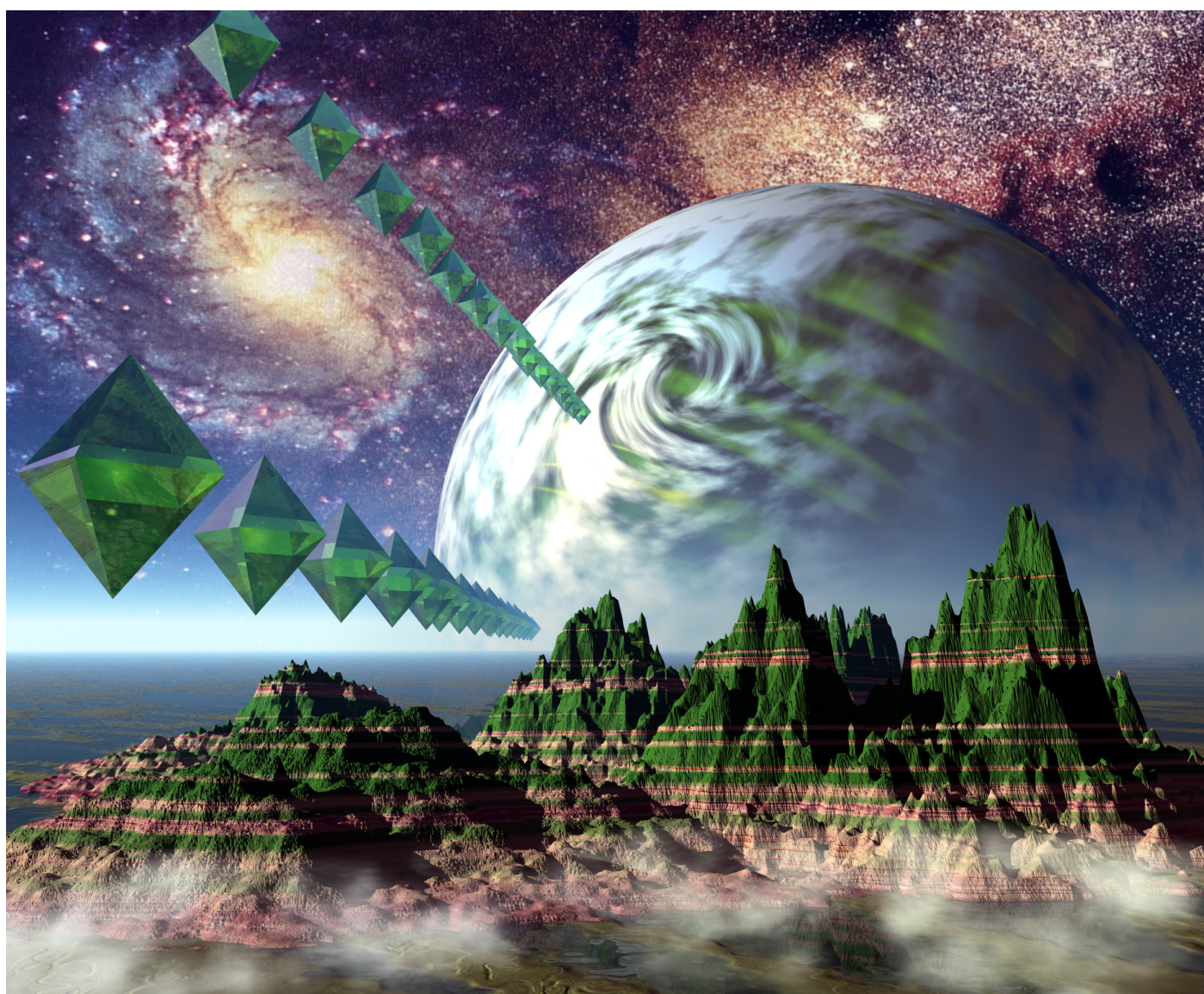
A pre-written campaign I bought, and eventually ran, that came closest to my ideal of this sort of complexity

was the *City of Lies** campaign for *Legend of the Five Rings*. The boxed set comes complete with a detailed who's who; both player and GM version, and for me, that shows they've already got their focus right. It's a story about people and their often twisted motivations. There are a number of layered, interconnecting plots, which centre around the opium trade in the Scorpion city of Ryoko Owari. Players are brought in as Imperial magistrates to investigate the death of the last magistrate, so they have a clear purpose and role from the start which frames the campaign nicely. I banned players from playing the Scorpion Clan – as I felt it was better to keep that den of notorious dirty tacticians firmly in the other camp, thus heightening tension and player paranoia – and requested that one player took some social standing to help smooth their way through the tricky social setting.

It's not a perfect campaign. I had to back-engineer one aspect of the plot that wasn't fully written. You can also fill in some of the logic leaps with clues from summoned spirits. I've heard people bemoan *L5R* for its lethal combat system, but this campaign was very fighting light, which meant that fighting could be dangerous. I think *City of Lies* is a great model for a finite investigation and politics game, which immerses players in a dynamic world of competing motivations. And there's plenty of room to embellish it with wider Imperial and clan politics, if you like that sort of thing. For a more recent game with a great investigatory focus, I recommend the Bookhounds of London campaign for *Trail of Cthulhu* and more generally, *Trail of Cthulhu*. As my partner is still running it, I'm not allowed to look at the source material yet. But Kenneth Hite does seem to be the Outer God of detailed background material, from the brief glances I've snuck.

*As of writing, *City of Lies* is still available online in pdf format, and I've seen a few paper copies for sale second hand, so I can recommend it in good conscience.

Ambrose Hall is a writer mostly of fiction. You can find out more about his work at <https://mrvolpone.wordpress.com/>





The Craft by John Dodd

There are some who believe that anyone can learn the skill of running a game, that there are no mystical secrets to the craft and that it's all a matter of hard work and preparation...

I got news for them...

They're right...

There are a number of things you can do to make the job easier, but at the end of the day, you and your players get out of it what you (the GM) put into it. There are those who will argue that the players need to be putting something in to make the game special, and there is some truth to that, but the largest responsibility is to the GM, without them, there is no world, no plot, no narrative to explore, and the players will have nothing to add because there's no one to tell it to.

For those murmuring in dark corners about games that don't need GM's, games that don't need one GM instead need all the players to be the GM, so what I'm about to say is equally relevant to those games. A GM is the final arbiter of what goes on in the world, they're capable of wrecking the entire game in an instant in a way that a player just can't do. An inattentive player can be cut out of the action if need be, an inattentive GM cuts the entire game.

This is sounding like I'm putting everything on the GM, and to be honest, I am. I have a particular outlook on games, being that the GM takes the part of God, and if God isn't prepared, then neither is the world.

So what to do?

There are basics that every GM must learn before they take the field, without the understanding of these basics, the game will never get off the ground.

First: The World

Every game needs a world to live in, and while you can use any of the predesigned settings out there, you have to know it, you have to be aware of the factions and politics of the world, you need to know who is who and what's going on there. If something doesn't apply in your world that does in the main rulebooks, then you need to let the players know, because I'll guarantee that there'll be someone at the table who'll have read the bit that you don't want to use. The other reason that you need to know the world is because if you don't, there's a break in the action while you go check on whatever the players just came up with, and nothing disengages the game more than the world still being built around the action.

Second: The Story

Not as important as the world, and for good reason, because there's any number of things that you can do with the story once it starts, but the world has to remain the same unless the players are involved in world changing events. The story has to have a good beginning, nothing else, just a beginning.

Stories have a beginning, middle, and an end I hear you say...

Stories that you write do...

This isn't your story alone anymore, the second you get the players into the game, you've given them a pen and let them on to your page, don't be surprised if at some point in time their writing goes away from where you had all this planned.

Take inspiration from books and films, there aren't any original ideas any more, there are permutations on a theme, but nothing truly new, humanity is too inventive, so don't be afraid to borrow from others, if it was good enough to have a film made about it, someone liked it...

The Craft by John Dodd

There's a capital P in Players for a reason, because you need people who want to Play. People play RPGs for all sorts of reasons, from the social aspect of sitting around a table and talking with their friends, for the joy, for the danger, for the puzzles, but most of all, for the doing of things that they themselves can't do. Players don't sign up to have their adventurers sit down and eat breakfast, *they* can do that themselves, so why would you gather together to do things you do every day.

What they want is adventure, and you have to be the one that gives them that.

There are some players who only want to have the social aspect of the game, to gather round a table and talk with their friends, and this is fine, but if you're a group of friends meeting just to shoot the breeze, that's one thing. If you're there to play a game...

You need to be playing a game...

This is where the craft comes into it...

When you start the game, you need a clear purpose for the players, and whether you've spoken to them in advance about this and told them all the things that you're planning, or dropped them in it and had them hit the ground running, that initial purpose *must* be clear.

The point here?

It doesn't matter what the initial purpose is, and in many cases, it's often better if the purpose that they thought they were brought together for turns out to be not what they thought it was.

Nothing engages imagination more than something not being what it seems...

Building a good game is like putting a jigsaw together, but it's a jigsaw that hasn't been painted yet, and as each new piece is put on the table, it's down to you to make sure that it fits with the other pieces. When the players take the other direction completely, it's down to you to make sure that where they go next is somewhere that keeps their interest, but also somewhere that fits into the jigsaw.

This is a lot easier than it seems...

Every decision that the players are called upon to make has a Yes/No outcome, be prepared for either answer and don't base your storyline on guessing what the players might do, because if there's one thing the players do all the time, it's the unexpected... What you don't let them change is the timeline of events that go on when they're not on the scene. If your game has a dragon flying over at midday or a bank robbery at 15:00 of that day, unless the players have done something to change it, *it still happens*, and this is at the heart of campaigns that have the players engaged, the world must go on without them, you can't make allowances for the players not being fast enough to take care of something, for them missing clues, and for them getting things wrong. The world does not care about them, and you, as the world, *cannot* care for them. Players who get the idea that the GM is going to watch out for them will take larger and larger risks till the game resembles an 80's action movie that has a whole bunch of heroes with script immunity.

Is it unfortunate that the characters sometimes don't win?

Absolutely...

Is it essential to the game that when they win, they've done it because they got it all right?

Absolutely...

Drop hints if you have to, have NPC's turn up and help where you need to, but never, ever *let* them have the win, make them work for it. Don't make them work too hard for it, if they reveal the master villain at the bar in the first two minutes, let them have it (I'd check that one of them hadn't photocopied my notes first...) and work on making the next villain something not quite so obvious. Don't make it impossible, their characters may be Sherlock Holmes, but they aren't, and while it's excellent when one of them makes that leap of logic to get the clue, don't give them too many hints, think of it like a scale, with the weight of the clues on one side and the weight of the win on the other, this scale stays perfectly balanced at all times, so for every clue that you give them, you take something away from the win. When you solve the clue, it either comes down with a sound like thunder, or it taps gently because there was nothing left to figure out.

This applies with all things, if you're playing a game where they have to stop a monster rampaging, it takes the victory away if they could only do it with twenty NPC's at their back and makes it a feat of heroics if they manage it with no help at all, and no matter what happens, never, ever have the NPC's take the win, the players are the heroes, they win or lose on their own merit, and when a third party comes in and takes the win, no one wins...

The best games are the ones where the win was hard earned and well fought, just make sure that the players have the tools they need to win the fight.

Something that every GM learns over time, is that *every* game is improvised, you may have a script, but unless you've given it to the players and told them to follow it (in which case it's a play, not a game), the players will deviate from it. You can threaten them or bribe them to get back with your plan, but that makes it *your* game and not the game of all of you, it's not easy being a GM, it's all the senior jobs in a film production without the budgets and assistants, but it's also the most rewarding thing on the table, because when the epic moments occur, it was in your world that they occurred, and just as the gods look in from Olympus, so you get to share in the triumphs.

Finally, and this is something a lot of GM's don't think of when they're putting things together, you need to enjoy the game as much as the players do, you need to find joy in the encounters you craft and the places you take them, because if you don't, that lack of enthusiasm for what you're doing will shine through and it'll be fun for no one.

It's the game of all of you...

Be the Game...



A handful of years ago I ran a panel at an Eastercon as part of the Eclectic 21 group. We run a stream on a wide range of topics and mine usually end up as comics and role playing games (as well as the infamous Air Guitar Workshop). This particular year I wanted to address the feeling I had that tabletop roleplaying was shrinking as a hobby. I deliberately used the provocative title 'Roleplaying is Circling the Drain' with the premise that in an 'instant access' age finding and maintaining a regular tabletop RPG group was becoming less attractive. MMORPGs and other videogame options were a more accessible and convenient alternative to many who would have once rolled dice. Since my favourite subjects are normally not the mainstream, especially at a very literary convention like Eastercon, my turnout expectation was low. What I did get was nearly 50 people turning up who all wanted to argue that roleplaying was alive and well. And surprisingly many of them were adamant that the internet was helping the hobby. In the years since then I have become more convinced that they were totally right and that this electronic communication medium is a boon to people getting together around a table once a week to make stories.

Looking for Group

In the late 1990s my London based partner Vicky met online a British ex-pat, Tim, who lived in Washington, America. With a mutual love of HP Lovecraft, Tim started to GM a play-by-email game of Call of Cthulhu with Vic as the only player. When a few years later he returned to London, they started a weekend group with some other people. In a time when home internet meant dial up modems and expensive usage, two people across the globe started their own story of insanity and horror (Tim went on to write 'The King in Yellow' scenario book for Chaosium).

The reason I felt roleplaying was suffering came from what I witnessed within my own group. We played in a pub with a few other groups, taking up the small function room. The groups were all settled; I managed to squeeze in mine when two previous ones merged. And the problem with that was that every few weeks somebody new to London would turn up looking to join in a group. But as the existing groups were all at that 5 to 7 size, nobody wanted to expand. What was heartbreaking was trying to get these disparate souls linked up. We tried getting phone numbers and email addresses and passing them on, but it just didn't work out. Only once did we get three of them together. I believe they went off to play together elsewhere. I hope so.

However, the problem with tabletop roleplaying is that you need to find a group of people who are willing to be at the same place at the same time on a regular basis. And that is hard. Two people wargaming together is easier. Board game groups can play no matter who or how many turn up. But role playing needs some level of consistency and

a minimum group size (I've played a one GM, one player game myself and it can be done. It's just not as fun).

In the social media age, however, there are a myriad of choices (a hydra of choices?). There are RPG Facebook groups for regions and specific games. No longer do you need to travel all the way to your local games shop to pin up a notice on a corkboard with your phone number. And speaking of games shops...

Amazon is Killing Game Shops

Or at least that's what some people say. When I started role playing and wargaming, while I6 and doing my A-levels at a local collage there was one game shop in Hanley, Stoke-On-Trent called Fiction Factory. It was situated in a grubby underpass from the bus station and had a mixed smattering of stock, although it did have a basement play area. And the nearby comic shop had some role playing stuff too.

And frankly, we were lucky to have that.

For many gamers not based in dense urban areas, obtaining gaming supplies was a challenge. Usually a big, planned visit to the nearest city was required. If there was an annual convention or event many gamers would spend their annual 'budget' there for the coming year (my father still does this with the one toy soldier show he visits every year in London).

Now the discerning gamer has a wide range of purchasing options. While Amazon is blamed for a loss of business for small game shops, many of them have converted to the 'clicks and mortar' business model and become Amazon sellers themselves, as well as other routes like ebay.

Speaking of which, has there ever been such a large market for second hand games? The evening I wrote this, I took a rule book out of my gaming chest (yes, I keep it all in a big steel chest. Living the cliché). And then found I could no longer close the lid flush (after taking something out!). So it looks like that list of games that I no longer want will be turned into a sales list. Like many gamers who want to downsize or de-clutter, it's never been easier to find that fellow gamer trying to complete a collection or find a recommended classic. Along with ebay and other auction sites, there are social media groups dedicated to trading games (like the awkwardly named 'Roleplaying and Board Games for Sale UK & EU ONLY!' which I joined recently on Facebook).

With cheap and powerful devices we not only get to shop from anywhere in the world at any time, but we can also have it now. Those same devices allow us a massive role playing library in a device the size of a paperback book. Web shops like DriveThru RPG (www.drivethrurpg.com) allow GMs to quickly build a library they can read anywhere at any time. And then write on that same device planning their next campaign. Whilst doing research for it!

The internet, along with cheap bulk mail capacity gives small companies an international reach. The company All Rolled Up (www.allrolledup.co.uk) make dice rolls with pockets for pens, notebooks and all your other paraphernalia. They are a husband and wife team who hand make the rolls here in the UK. While making a number of 'stock' patterns, they often do short runs or even one-offs with rare or unusual materials. Yet the ability to sell around the world means they had enough exposure to win an Ennie award for best Roleplaying Accessory at the US GenCon games convention.

So you're shopping online, why not just play there?

As I mentioned earlier, my partner bootstrapped her group via play by email. In the previous issue of Journey Planet you may recall several articles about Play By Mail (PBM) games (see Letters From Absentia, Ed.). With email, PBMs became as fast as players could take their turns. In the early 1990's few people had email addresses. I had my first one but didn't use it as the only people I knew with email were my fellow students who I saw every day!

In this age of multiple social media platforms email itself seems a little archaic. But pure electronic text conversation lacks the sociability of the hobby. Those walls are tumbling week by week. Video chat tools like Google Hangouts mean people can collaborate in real time, sharing documents like maps or handouts in Googledocs.

When D&D 4th Edition came out, Wizards of the Coast saw the online opportunity and started developing tools for subscribers to work online. With 5th Edition they now have the Fantasy Grounds Virtual Table. This replicates the physical gaming table on screen along with maps, counters, character sheets and dice rolls. Another option in this area is Tabletop Simulator (sold online via Steam). This creates a virtual tabletop where any sort of boardgame, wargame or RPG can be played. The gaming resources are created and shared by the community. If it lacks something your game needs, you can create it and share with others.

Kickstart my Heart

The internet can democratise sales channels by putting small providers on the same playing field as the large ones. But it can also do the same for publishing and manufacturing.

Crowdfunding has become part of the business landscape since the launch of Kickstarter in 2009. The ability to pre-sell goods to a passionate, early adopter customer base means companies can precisely create just the right amount of stock for each project, secure in the knowledge that a minimum amount will be secured before they are required to fill the orders.

But while many business models like Kickstarter as a safe method of funding, others such as Ed Jowett of RPG Publisher Shades of Vengeance (www.shadesofvengeance.com), find it has deeper strengths:

“We are slightly unusual in the way we approach Kickstarter: usually, by the time we go there, the book is completed. We go to Kickstarter not with the aim of recouping our development costs, because that is extremely difficult for a small company with an unknown IP, but aiming to make our first print runs in both the US and the UK. We have, to date, run 7 successful Kickstarters for our own projects and 3 for people whose games we helped to create.

Kickstarter is vital to us because without it, we would have no realistic way of getting a new product noticed. There are a large group of people on Kickstarter who are on the lookout for new games, a number of reviewers who focus on what is new interesting on Kickstarter and some people who just won't visit your website or go searching for products that look interesting on sites like DriveThruRPG.

It also gives us an indication of how popular a product is going to be and what we should focus on with Expansions - if a large number of people want it, it is something we will make sure gets content!”

Chris Tregenza of 6D6 fireball finds Kickstarter a similar place to be found by gamers looking for products:

“We have run two Kickstarters for our 6d6 RPG [<http://6d6rpg.com>], both were modestly successful and funded around the 300% mark. For us, Kickstarter is a way to get books to a finished, published state so we can expand our back-catalog. It's just one part of the publishing cycle and not the entirety of the products life. Kickstarter's main advantage is the ability to reach a wide audience. Kickstarter, ultimately, is a store and one we want our products in. It's only difference between it and sites like DriveThruRPG or bricks&mortar stores is that people buy the product before it is finished. One aspect of Kickstarter which distorts people's perceptions are the headline grabbing campaigns - Numenera, 7th Sea etc. The numbers are impressive but if you look at the number of backers, it is still tiny - a few thousand people. Nearly always they are hard-core fans built up by the author by years of hard work or (more commonly and more depressing for publishers of new games) though nostalgia for a product. Compared to the print run of products in the 1980's (or say a present day Games Workshop product) it is very small. Kickstarter is a tool, a way to generate some income, some hype, and reach a new audience but it is just one tool among many for a publisher.” In my opinion, it is telling that games gets a section all to themselves on Kickstarter. With the massive success of card games like Exploding Kittens and Cards Against Humanity, crowdfunding is proving a boon and an alternative to traditional publishing.

For the Lulz

As a teenager one of my friends read Dragon magazine. In an age where only published rulebooks supplied background material and plot ideas, having an official magazine was a drip feed of bankable gaming resources. One of the elements I always enjoyed in Dragon were the various comic strips. Two of those strips have made the leap to online; Nodwick and Dork Tower. John Kovalic's Dork Tower has been especially successful, enabling him to launch tie-in games and to work as an artist for many other game franchises.

These comics are part of the webcomics movement, which has grown over the past decade. In a similar way that the internet has given voice to many independent RPG writers, it has done the same for comics creators. Many of those combine the medium with a love of roleplaying, another classically 'geek' pastime. Such comics include The Order of the Stick, Looking for Group and Full Frontal Nerdity.

Twenty years ago, if fans wanted to express their thoughts, opinions and ideas they would create a photocopied fanzine and hand copies to their gaming group. Nowadays as well as blogs there are video channels on YouTube such as Geek & Sundry and ENWorld. With the ability to enjoy such multimedia content while on the go and share it via social media yesterdays fanzine writers have a voice around the world, and not just their weekly games group – although the writers who still want to write fanzines just upload PDFs now.

The Time I was Right?

A lot of old media scaremongering surrounds the internet age. Print and television is facing serious disruption to their long-standing and previously unchallenged business model and they defensively lash out at new channels taking 'their' audience away.

In gaming the audience is now the creators. All of my friends who create games, write fanzines and produce other role playing content are themselves gamers and subscribers to YouTube channels as well as backers of Kickstarters. Mirroring many other stories of the internet democratising other fields of interest, role playing is undergoing its second revolution. Go to your search engine of choice and take a look; there's a lot of people out there just like you who want to listen, share and roll dice.

Going Rogue

by Gerry McEvoy

Rogue is my favourite *D&D* class; they always have a moral flexibility that allows for more devious plans than most other (good) classes will allow. There are iterations of Rogue in most rpg systems, for example Smuggler is the second most common iteration that I have come across.

I have been playing RPGs for decades, and in that time I have made mistakes as a Rogue and I've seen the horrendous results on a play group of a badly played Rogue. In this article I am going to give you a primer on what I consider to be the optimum way to play a Rogue and for GMs to deal with a bad one.

Character Generation

Have a good think about what type of Rogue your character is. There's nothing wrong with your standard 'thief with a heart of gold' archetype, but have a think about what kind of thief are you are.

There are con artists, burglars, highwaymen (people?), gamblers, spies, or just morally flexible opportunists. Rogues usually act as the liaison between the party and the underworld. Think about what sort of people your character could get to know through their roguish profession, and how they could help the party.

Like I said, there's nothing wrong with the standard archetype, but a bit of flavour never did any harm. Also, does your Rogue have a spiritual side; do you worship some dark god of thieves or lady luck? Does that belief bring you into conflict with other characters? If so, how do you handle it? Do you leave everything in the Gods' hands or accept that sometimes you have to make your own luck/blood sacrifice?

Before You Begin

- 1) Create a loot agreement: Loot can be a source of great division in any party, and a 'finders keepers' policy will cause problems. You can avoid a lot of unnecessary grief between characters (and players) if there's an agreement in place. The basic form is that anything useful to a specific class goes to the player/s with that class, and the valuables are divided up equally. An optional one that was introduced into our games more recently (about 8 years ago) was a that there would be an extra share taken out of the valuables loot (i.e. five players = six shares) to be used as an operational budget. This meant that when we rolled into a town the party treasurer would make a list of what everyone needed ammo and armour wise, and that would be paid for from the operating share. This has worked out quite nicely so far, though be aware that NPCs in your group may try to claim a share too if the GM's getting twitchy about how rich you are.
- 2) Tell the party how your combat skills work. Rogue types invariably have a sneakier combat technique than the other classes and the rest of the party need to know how they could make things optimal for you in combat. Backstab in *D&D* is an obvious example, Rogues get a big boost to their first strike if the target doesn't see you coming, so ideally when one of the party engages, they will try to split off enemies from the attacking group so you can get in your sneaky stabbing in to its best effect.

In Play:

You're Not A Kleptomaniac.

Shiny things are indeed to be coveted and secured, but not at the cost of your parties lives. When the big bad boss of the city calls your group in to do him a favour, don't steal his stapler, it will irk him mightily and you could roleplay your way into an early TPK*.

Timing is everything.

Your Party Aren't Marks.

Just because you can steal everything doesn't mean you should, and particularly not from your party. You depend on these people to keep your character alive, so stealing their things may lead to them being less than helpful when you need them. Also, doing this voids the loot agreement with consequences for the actual play group.

"Oh no! Our Rogue is wounded! If only someone hadn't stolen the Scroll of Healing I had in my bag..."

You Can Create Some Great Roleplay.

The Rogue can provide a great source of moral friction that creates opportunities for great roleplay. Ultimately roleplaying games take place in a world of moralities made real.

A Rogue's moral flexibility allows them greater freedom in their choices and proposals for courses of action. This in turn means the other players will have to roleplay their way into accepting the Rogue's proposal. Can the Paladin really allow their symbols of faith be covered up and walk amongst evil doers even if it brings them closer to the true heart of the current evil? Can the druid allow the poisoning of a stream even if it would take out the horde of evil doers? Can the Doctor allow the sabotaging of a civilian ship's life support to flush out a bad guy?

Roleplay!

Mischief not Malevolence.

I know I may seem to be a bit of a killjoy, but don't get me wrong. You can have fun with the class and other players, just don't steal their stuff or get them killed. You'd think this was obvious but you'd be surprised, particularly at cons where it's not the player's regular group. Save your properly evil machinations for the bad guys, but even then be aware there are lines your party members will likely not cross. Tricking a bad guy into falling off a cliff is fine, kidnapping his kid and forcing him to jump off it is an entirely different story.

You need to strike a balance between the mischief and malevolence that will prevent the rest of the party stringing you up.

Games Masters Tip. Dealing with a Rogue gone rogue:



Putting your Rogue on trial for bad behaviour can be a fun session if your group has a bit of a political lean to them, just make sure they are aware you will seriously enforce the sentence. Start the session by handing the Rogue a blank character sheet and telling them they should start thinking of a new character, regardless of outcome the player will likely change their in game behaviour once they are aware genuine consequences exist.

At conventions, the players rarely know the scenario, so maybe drop a few hints that the bad Rogue is some sort of traitor. I wouldn't kill them outright, rather leave a door open so the other players could justify taking that player out. It should open the door to some nice roleplaying.

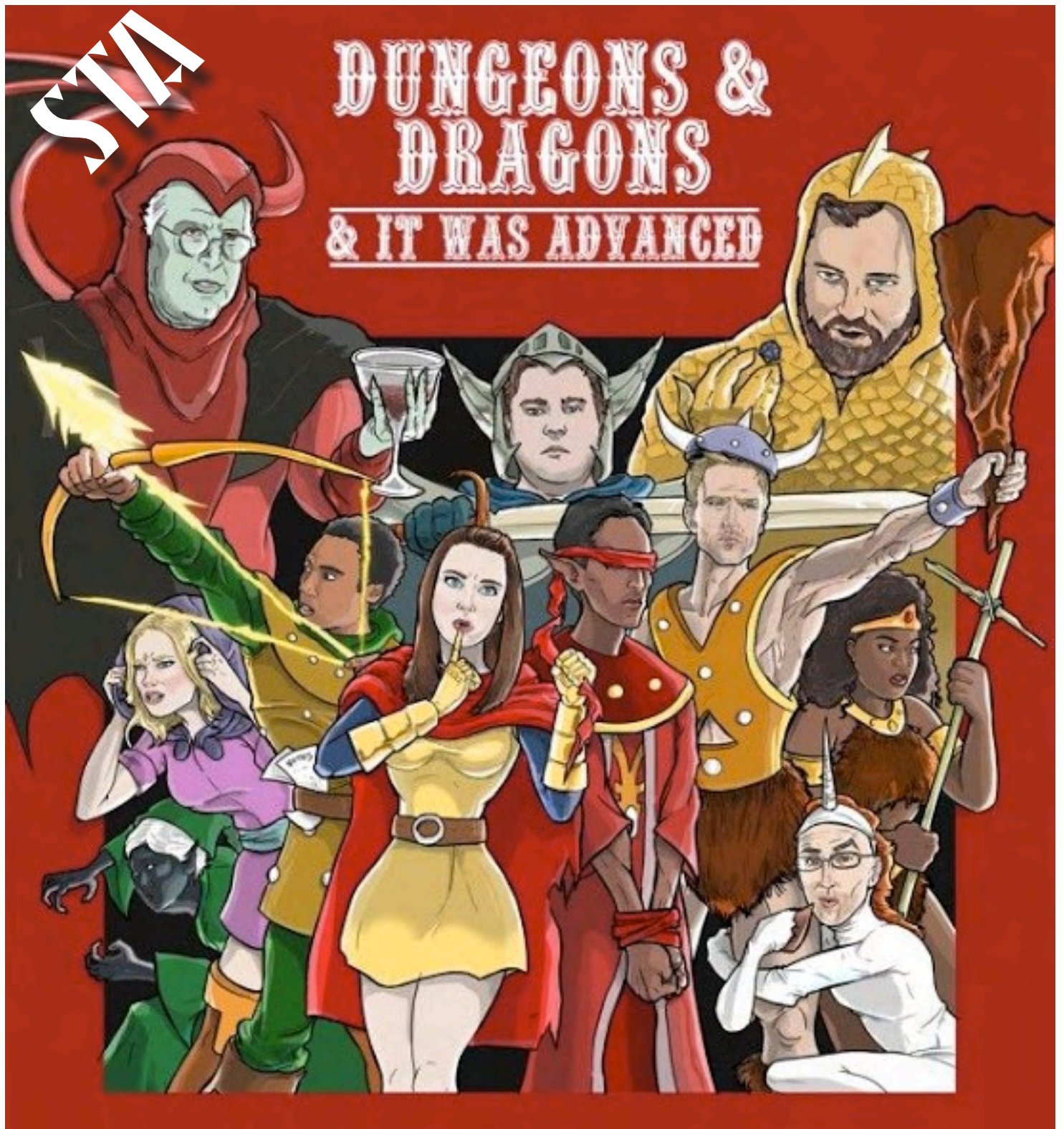
Have Fun!

Rogues are a fun character type, their flexible morality, unique combat style and shadowy past add huge amounts of flavour to any game.

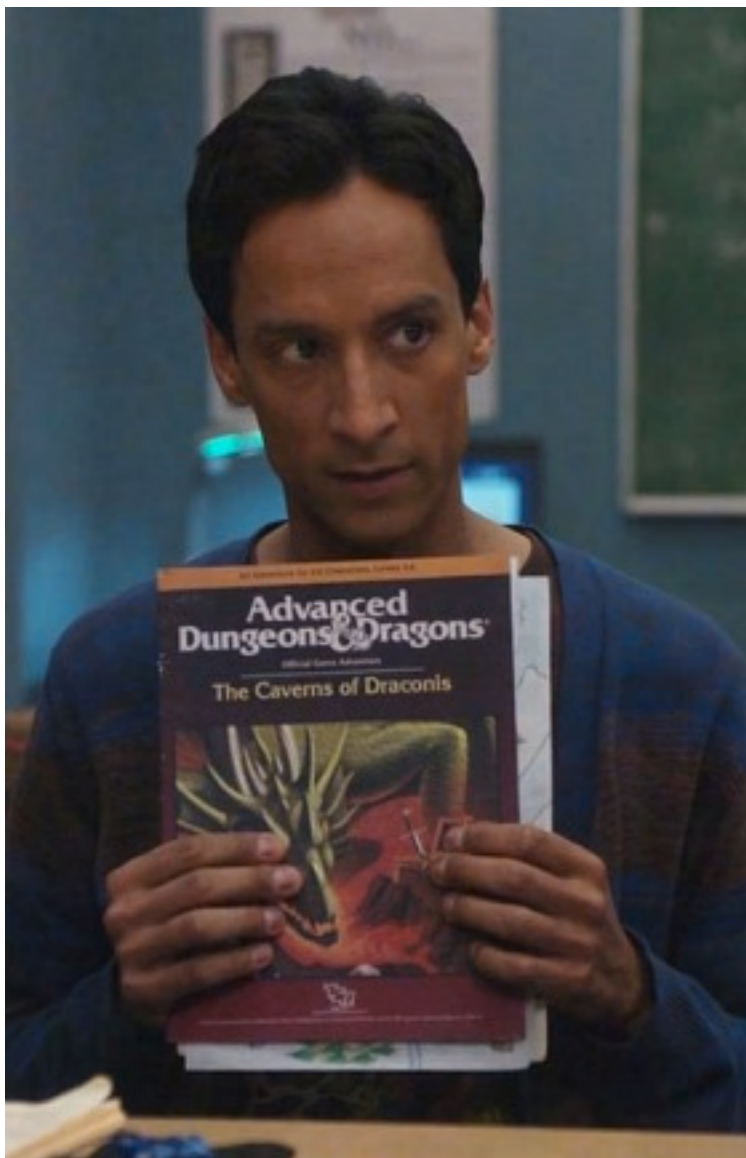
When someone picks a fighter, you know what they are about from the get go, the same with a healer or wizard type but a Rogue, a Rogue is always a different story

For flavour and fun, always go Rogue.

*Total Party Kill (Ed.)



**And I Walk With Them —
D&D in the Harmonverse
by Chris Garcia**



I will not be at all objective from this point forward. *Community* is, without doubt, the only thing humanity will ever be remembered for. The perfect sitcom, the perfect television program, the perfect recorded information, the perfect philosophical system. It is all those things, and its leader (for 5 of its 6 seasons (and a movie...)) was the Prophet Dan Harmon (All Praise Be Unto He!). Yes, Dan is incredibly flawed. He's been known to fly off the handle and dive headfirst into racist and sexist rants that almost defy human logic. He's probably an alcoholic. He's almost certainly an asshole. The one time I met him, he was cool, but seemed decidedly bitter at just about everything. We both lost Hugos to Neil Gaiman that night. It was fun, and Dan was drunk. Go figure.

In season 2 of the series, *Community* took a very dark topic, body image and the connection to suicide, and turned it into a teaching moment, where not only did the characters grow, but a message was provided. The episode centered around young Neil, known far and wee as 'Fat Neil', who is a *D&D* whizz. Jeff, *Community*'s main disgraced lawyer turned leader of a strange community college study group, decides to try and save Neil by gathering the group to play a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* with Abed (perhaps the finest character in the history of AWSUM!) serving as the DM. The group grabs characters, all with terrible names (a Dwarf: Zippedy-Doo, a Thief: Hector the Well-Endowed) and they're off to the races. Halfway through, the group is joined by the craziest, most-racist, crazy member of the study group – Pierce Hawthorn (aka Pierce the Dickish, also Grampa the Flatulent) who then begins to upset the apple cart, taunting the members of the group, and attempting to drive Neil over the edge. As Pierce, Chevy Chase taps into a darkness that is often beneath the surface

of many of his roles, and here he is exceptional. The episode ends with Pierce being defeated, Neil finding a strength he never had before, and the group questioning the presence of Pierce, while Neil discovers an admiration.

This wasn't Harmon's first foray into comedy set within the world of *D&D*. As a driving force behind the Dead Alewives, he wrote the skit known as *Dungeons and Dragons*, where the Dead Alewives Watchtower took listeners into an actual gaming session, where the all-too-real phrases "Where's the Mountain Dew?", "I attack the Darkness!" and "If there are any girls there I want to do them!" were uttered. This skit was easily the Alewives' biggest hit, and though it's 20 years old now, is still widely known and often quoted by geeks young and once-were-young. Harmon, the voice of the DM in the skit, plays his part perfectly.



After *Community*'s success, Harmon began a podcast called *Harmontown*. At first, it was largely just Harmon & Co. 'dicking around on the internet', but quickly evolved into something else... something much more else. Harmon recruited an audience member, Spencer Crittenden, to be game master for a weekly round of a continuing *Dungeons & Dragons* game. The games are largely non-sequitorial, the group usually includes the principal members of the podcast, a special guest, and sometimes even members of the audience. There's little coherence, and often the game becomes merely fodder for one or more running gags. They moved from *D 'n D* to *Shadowrun*, but the idea was the same.

“Gather close that you might harken the story of Fat Neil.”

Harmon obviously has a love for Gygax's creation, but at the same time, understands the folly of the game, and the power of the escape it provides. The lesson of Fat Neil is obvious; escape is only as good as that escape's reality is kept separate from Real Reality. The distance that *D&D* provides from our real world varies. The youngsters in the Dead Alewives skit are hardly escaped at all, they're still beholden to Cheetoh's and Mountain Dew, and the minutia of the rules of the game. *Harmontown* sees the escape go somewhat deeper, but only so much as it forwards the purpose of the podcast's comedy. This idea was also central to the second *Community* episode to feature the group playing the game. There, David Cross appears as an estranged son who is asserting his independence from his father. As that game goes on, we see how it is not the characters that define the interactions between the players, but the players' biases. The game becomes the reality for father and son, because it is the only reality shared by father-and-son, thereby taking it out of alternate reality and making it their Earth-Prime.

Harmon gets it, and his general approach to presenting role-playing in his comedy speaks to Harmon's main comedic thesis. He KNOWS RPGs are escapes, like all pop culture, but also knows that those escapes have real meaning beyond leaving our world. He makes us laugh at the situations within the reality of the escape, not laughing at the people who desire the reality of the escape (which is the path taken by the trash comedy *The Big Bang Theory*). Harmon makes us understand the escape and the surreality within it, and then allows us to laugh at it, instead of laughing at us for being dumb enough to desire it. That alone makes *Community* great, and the best of all possible worlds for *D&D* to inhabit.





Irish Gaming Cons - Past, Present, & Future

by Brian Nisbet

There are many stereotypes about Irish people. None of them are true for all of us, but some tend to be — on average — more true than others. We love to tell stories, we love to socialise and we love to play games. We love to come together to celebrate the ties that bind us, to show off, to entertain, to meet new people and, now and again, to have a pint. It really is no surprise at all that Irish gamers love their conventions so much!

Ireland isn't a big country. Neither is Northern Ireland. Between the two there's a population these days of just under 6.5m, and gaming (of the wargaming, cardgaming, tabletop RPGing and LARPing variety) is niche. While there are anime and comic con events that pull in thousands of people, the biggest event that calls itself a gaming convention (as opposed to including gaming amongst many other things) attracts at most around 600 – 700 people. The smallest regular convention is around the 50 person mark. But they're everywhere! A very rough count on the Irish Games Association's (IGA - iga.ie) convention calendar turns up around 20 events in 2016. Oh how we love our cons!

But fine, you say, you have a lot of cons, you play some games, what of it? Well, we're very proud of our cons and we do things in a way that very few others do. We've won awards for some of those things and we've inspired gamers, writers, designers and conrunners around the world. I think these cons are definitely worth talking about and that's what I'm going to do!

The Irish convention scene started, like so many other around the world, in a university. The Dublin University (better known as Trinity College, Dublin) Boardgames and Wargames Club (now known as Trinity Gamers) is rumoured to have held the first Leprecon in or around 1979 (2016 marked the 37th iteration of the con, but the numbering got a little fuzzy in the early years). The event had its ups and downs, run as it was by students who often had a variety of pressing things on their minds at any given point in time. The early events were more about wargaming and big, serious boardgames (none of your worker placement, resource management back then), but there was also tabletop roleplaying. The event continued on, gathering more attendees, but it remained largely Trinity-centric. It wasn't until the very late 80s/early 90s that things really got interesting.

There were gaming societies in universities all over Ireland and they started to talk about running something bigger, something national. The Irish Games Association was formed and plans were made to run the first Gaelcon in 1989. As it often goes the event was both a failure and a success. Things were all a bit haphazard and due to all sorts of politics the IGA became far more Dublin (and Trinity) centric than had been planned. However, politics aren't the focus of this article, conventions are. Gaelcon '89 was a national event and not only did the movement that brought it about inspire others to start their own cons, it also took what Leprecon had been doing so well and made it bigger. Warpcon (started by the Wargames and Role Playing Society in University College Cork) had its first con in 1991 and as the 90s went on it seemed that every single society (and a few other groups) wanted to claim a weekend for their own event. Each con had a different flavour and there were rivalries (both humorous and more serious) between them all. But the core aspects of Irish conventions had been established.

The most obvious was the organisation. The cons ran, often very well, and the Con Director would bring different levels of organisation to their events, but they always felt a little like they were dancing along the edge of a very big drop, while balancing a pint. Everyone was volunteering, staffing levels varied deeply depending on how good the club had been the night before and who had paired off with whom. Staffing rosters would also change depending on relationships sparking, or flaring out, sometimes spectacularly in both cases. The feeling was that of a party at the

end of the world, that fun must be had now, before the chance was gone. You could always fit in one more game, one more conversation, one more roll of the dice before the cruel sun rose. There is a sense of that in many cons, in many countries, but no matter where I've gone in the world it never feels so vital. I'm biased of course, but in my defence, visitors from many lands have told us the same. I'm pretty sure that Mike Pondsmith hasn't played Twister, while drinking Guinness, while the closing ceremony is set up behind him in any other country in the world!

This, of course, meant that things went wrong, that there were moments of desperation and sometimes disappointment, but the energy generally carried people through and onwards to the next adventure, not minding a delay of their game, a lost scenario, being sent to the wrong room, or many other minor issues.

The next big thing that people noticed at Irish cons was the way we run scenarios. The sheer number of RPGs these days, along with a greater diversity in the games people want to play, has changed this somewhat, but the traditions are still alive. In Ireland it's rare to play a single table of any game. A writer's scenario will be given to other GMs to run for multiple tables: as many as GMs and players can be found for. In the 90s the "big three" of *AD&D 2nd Ed*, *Call of Cthulhu* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* would dominate a timetabled slot. At Gaelcon there might be fifteen tables at a time, all playing the same story. As a GM you'd have to be careful not to spoil the story for the table next door (if they were progressing a little more slowly than your players), but that was a risk worth taking. As a writer it was fantastic to look over a room and see tables reacting in different ways to plot points and to know, from a gasp, a line, a rousing speech, that the scenario had reached a particular point. There are downsides to this approach, against the "one writer, one table" approach mostly taken elsewhere, but the sense of shared experience, of shared story, was more than worth it. Overhearing (or participating in) the "What did you folks do when..." or "Oh, god, wait, your GM did what?" conversations kept the game going long after the last die was rolled. As an organiser this system was glorious hell. Evenings would be spent ringing prospective GMs, hoping they would be home (the 90s, remember), trying to persuade them to run one more game, maybe in a system they only sorta knew. The diamonds were the GMs who could take a scenario with virtually no notice and run an amazing game. The downsides were the players disappointed by an ill-prepared GM, but those situations created some pretty amazing stories too!

In the early 90s, wargaming was declining compared to roleplaying, but the halls at cons would still be full of trestle tables covered in scenery and gorgeously painted miniatures. Of all of the parts of the hobby the place of wargaming at cons has changed the least. The rules have changed over and over of course, but the measuring tapes, the miniatures and the incredible dedication of the players remains. While I was never a wargamer, I was always fascinated by that dedication, by the paint work, by the meticulous planning and by the fervour with which the players strove to win. Add to that groups like the Wild Geese who created their own intricate dioramas and rule systems every Gaelcon, inviting all comers to play a dambuster or a samurai. Sadly, the Wild Geese no longer bring these to the con, but others have stepped up to fill that void, pitching Redcoats against dinosaurs and letting new generations of players see how easy it is to get their squad to da chopper.

Card gaming, in the guise of *Magic: The Gathering*, appeared in Ireland (like everywhere else) in 1993. By the following year the cards were, quite literally, everywhere. Every flat surface was covered in them and the Wizards of the Coast guests were the most popular of all. Disorganised play became very organised and the big challenge was to stop people deckbuilding when they were supposed to be roleplaying. My big regret in regards to card gaming at Irish cons is that we never really figured out a way to fully integrate it and reconcile the needs of the pro events versus the nature of the con. There was too much of an attitude of putting the Magic players (and later Legend of the Five Rings) in a room and leaving them be. The entry fee structure didn't really mesh either and while there are still card events at Irish cons, it is more usual to see them as standalone events these days.

Live Action Role Playing (LARP) also really caught on in Ireland in the early 90s and its popularity, along with card gaming, was one of the reasons the huge number of people playing each RPG scenario declined. The idea really sparked with Irish con-goers and some epic events sprang forth from the imaginations of very talented writers. The first events weren't confined to a room, they roamed free over the con, intertwining with (and occasionally interrupting) everything. The lines quickly became blurred over whether a conversation was in the real world or the game and suddenly the stairway you wanted to use was filled with arguing Vampires or plotting Mages. Things evolved, of course, and the



situation couldn't continue to be quite so... unconstrained, but the passion and the efforts of every writer to put one over on the last game continue to this day. Once off games evolved into ongoing series, with players come to con after con to play the same character and see just how far their story could take them.

Of course no article on Irish conventions would be complete without a mention of our award winning charity auctions. Specifically, that award is the Diana Jones Award for Excellence in Gaming, 2006. The first auction started as a drunken act in a pub, but then we did it a second time and it became a tradition. The Irish have a habit of always trying to outdo each other in acts of generosity and the charity auctions really brought that out. We also sucked other people in. British nobility, Israeli military and famous games designers from all over the world got into the bidding, amazed by what was going on around them and seemingly desperate to get a taste of what everyone else was experiencing. There is no collected count of how much Irish cons have raised for charity (generally children's charities) over the years, but it is definitely a six figure sum at this point and that number is only going to go up.

All of these things happened at the cons in the early 90s and they still happen today. The faces have changed, the generations of students cycling through, occasionally making the same mistakes, but also finding new and brilliant ways to put on a show. Some cons have sadly declined, while others have sprung up. Boardgames are, unsurprisingly, a major part of cons these days, with Magic cards replaced on flat surfaces by whatever game is hottest right now, along with a lot of the old favourites. There are instances now of one writer, one table, but it's still far more likely to find two, three or four tables of a game being played at any one time, at least at the medium and large cons. *Pathfinder* has made a very big impression with their organised play really appealing to a lot of Irish con goers. The numbers at cons go up and down, depending on the levels of organisation and advertising (and the state of the economy) but the scene is still very healthy.

Possibly the biggest notable difference over the years has been the gender diversity. The number of women attending cons has gone up and up. There was once a point where I could name every woman at a large con. Thankfully that is very, very far from the case now. The university societies and cons have become actively more welcoming and while there are still issues (like every con scene all over the world) the right action has been taken and codes of conduct abound. The racial make-up of Ireland is one of the core reasons for the general lack of People of Colour at cons, but I do believe it is something con organisers will need to think seriously about as the country and its people continue to change and evolve.

So what does the future hold for the Irish con scene? With over sixty thousand people attending GenCon in 2015, will Irish gaming cons ever get as big as our anime and comics events? I'm inclined to think not, at least not in the short term. Numbers can be increased with better organisation and better advertising (when you think you've advertised enough, advertise some more), but the hobby in Ireland was niche in the '70s and it's still niche now. Even with more people playing boardgames everywhere, it's a leap from there to actually attending an event. I would dearly love to be proved wrong, of course. I would love to see a longer view taken by con organisers, especially those that don't rely on the churn of college student bodies for their committees. But it's far from an easy job and as with all voluntary work, there are always other priorities.

I do not think I want to see an overdose of professionalism, however. It would be too easy to ruin Irish cons by trying to make them something they aren't and to distil their wonder into a formula. The size of the events is part of the charm, the feeling of a village, of shared stories, the ease of meeting others, the inclusivity and never knowing who you'll bump into when playing your next game. So I suppose I'd love things to get bigger, for cons to be able to reach further and do more, but not too big, lest it become impersonal and the dance on the edge become something too safe. However, right now, I am still so in love with Irish cons and I firmly believe the future holds many positives. The passion is still strong, burning bright in the eyes of those who have just discovered this world and those of us who've been around a little longer. The focus is absolutely still on community, on having fun together and on eking out as much joy as possible from a weekend away from reality. I look forward to my next event, to seeing what new games I'll play, new ideas I'll encounter and new people I'll meet. A word of warning, however, for those who like what they've just read. It's a rare soul that can attend just one Irish con. Many a sorry traveller has walked out the front door wondering what just happened to them, all the while starting to make plans to come back the next time!





INT

Railroads & Lost Plot

by CJ Hooper

In today's climate of short attention spans, explosive movies and *Downton Abbey*, exposition is everywhere. There are no red herrings, and there is clunky dialogue which clearly spells out what the heroes must do to save the day. There will be explosions, but no real threat. The baddy's henchmen go down at a single strike to their glass jaws. The heroes may not deviate from their badly scripted path.

Alternatives may get considered, and then dismissed out of hand with some bafflegab terminology; at worst they will simply be ignored after the first mention. There are dynamic set pieces which if forced, cheat the audience and insult their intelligence.

Blockbuster films are linear and designed to entertain even the least discerning. A roleplaying game rather, should allow heroes to 'choose their own adventure'. It is vital, if playing *Vampire: the Masquerade* for example, that, no matter how important the final showdown with the Antediluvian may be, the players believe that they have reached this juncture as the result of their own autonomy.

Here we reach the Games Master's dilemma. It's the same problem; we've seen it many times...

Either

The players have one set of directions and no alternatives. If they develop a desire to follow an unexpected route the Games Master (GM) shuts down this option with an alacritous, opaque snub. "You try, it fails." The plot continues on its rails, but to the cost of the players' autonomy.

Or

The players, with no clear route available, exploit this unexpected option and wander off in another direction, into unprepared territory; a desert of the game in which the plot is lost.

A game will fizzle out in the light of either extreme course.

...

The removal of player autonomy is a dreadful thing and a sure-fire way to kill a game. My first great love of roleplaying was *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay (WFRP)*. I started playing this at the end of the '80s. In these games our GM would provide us with the freedom and clues to go where we wished and to pursue any lines of enquiry we thought best to rid the Old World of the green / furry / tentacular menaces of the occasion. Granted, we were 12 years old and, lacking the cynicism of our older neutral evil selves, needed little in-character encouragement to follow the plot threads. The point being that while we followed the various threads, we missed some clues, picked up on others, but still made it to the dramatic final scene. The risk of error and death was ever present; the opportunity to fail was always there.

Sadly the worst cases of being 'railroaded' that I have endured also comes from *WFRP* games. These are the more recent games in which there are no plot *threads* (plural); only one thread presents itself. Never has the phrase 'linear' been more apt to describe the adventure and setting for a game. You could change the names and the monsters but the plot was still as basic as a left to right scrolling arcade game. In the spirit of fairness I had to consider that maybe

it was my age and cynicism that had changed (it should also be borne in mind that the target demographic for *WFRP* is far younger than my years). Following a post-game review of a recently completed *WFRP* adventure the options were confirmed to be binary. Either the plot is followed or the game stops.

If a game becomes a walkthrough with the occasional fight scene, it ceases to be a game. It is a bedtime story. A guided tour is a guided tour regardless of whether you are in Middenheim or Royal Leamington Spa.

While it is important for players to have autonomy there is also the danger of too *much* freedom. The GM may encourage players to follow their own designs and schemes but without motivation or having missed all too obscure leads, the plot is lost.

In one very glorious 7th Sea campaign, our heroes were holed up surrounded by the Spanish (equivalent) Army / Navy. With no clear way of escape or resolution, the 'Butch and Sundance' ending was enacted as we blazed our way into a sepia-toned finish. We were posthumously told that we *should* (as opposed to *could*) have used the 'surrender and talk our way out of the situation and expose the double crossers' option. But we had enjoyed dying heroically; this is always a valid and appropriate option.

I refrain from dwelling on *Earthdawn* but the example there was one of a shopping trip by the players in the absence of a plot to follow. How many lengths of rope do you really need?

An experienced GM should have no issues in cajoling players back to the intended plot. Should such a situation arise, then common practice is for the GM to listen to the players' thoughts. The GM will then gracefully, and with little effort, use their characters' drives to keep them going in the right direction.

Careful readers will note the references to characters' drives. The Gumshoe system as used in games such as *Bookhounds of London (Trail of Cthulhu)* uses these effectively. The 'drive' of the characters is the device that pushes players into taking actions which propel the plot. 'Drive' actively encourages those incidents which may be considered unwise but necessary for the development of the adventure. Why does the girl go into the attic alone? Why does the wizened old scholar read the hide-bound tome of secrets? Why should you help the old man with the knife between his shoulder blades? Whether down to curiosity, thirst for the unknown or even righteousness, the players must keep moving.

There should be the tacit concord between the players and the GM that all will seek to engage with the situations presented. Many paths should be available to the party, each with appropriate seeds to gain the notice and attention of the characters. 'Seed trails' prevent lost plots and players having too wide a set of options and absent guidance.

None of the paths need to necessarily be red herrings, merely different routes to the centre of the maze. The situation should by no means be 'fail safe' as again 'fail safe' removes the autonomy of the players. By way of explanation, if you cannot fail then nothing that you do can change the outcome. This may be passive railroading but it is railroading nonetheless.

Perhaps the safest way of avoiding the plot loss and the railroad is to provide paths of least resistance.

There are such freeform games as *Gangbusters*, a Prohibition-based game of gangsters and molls which presents a wide city in which the players may set up, then operate their gang in any way they wish. However, calling this 'freeform' is something of a misnomer. There will be constraints set in place by external factors to the group. In this case the player group will decide how they wish to make their way in the world, in accordance with the Prohibition setting. Once decided they then discover the wisdom of their choice. While the plan may be informed it may not be the obvious option, but as difficulties present themselves so too do new opportunities. The key is that the players *find* the obstacles rather than being told of them. By committing to allow the party to progress by trial and error, the GM is allowing player autonomy, although the GM knows this is all an illusion.

This is aided by the application of a fully developed world setting. (Something often not considered where a plot is railroaded, and deviation is not expected.) In this respect the GM is safe in the knowledge that nothing they do is made up on the fly. The players will be assured that the GM is confident, everything that happens is still in accordance with 'the plan'; they are not therefore being cheated or fobbed off. The GM may guide their party through the sprawling metropolis and still have them arrive at the planned destination, via a number of potential routes. One great example of this was evident in the early days of *Vampire: The Masquerade*TM. Fully developed city guides were provided for settings, where each city had its place in 'our world' (in which the *Masquerade* was upheld). Although being a bit of a money spinner, or cynical marketing ploy to sell more material, this added realism and detail which helped enhance the dramatic environment. (That said, the *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*TM supplement *Rage Across New York* © was rubbish, but it was early days back then.)

...

While 'railroads' and 'lost plots' are opposite ends of the autonomy scale they are prevented by the same method of games mastering; that is the illusion of free will. Think back to playing *Fighting Fantasy* and the *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebooks. The thrill is that YOU decide. Don't be the GM that breaks this rule for the players. Be the GM that gives the party many options, and enjoy so much more the thrill of the party members having reached the end against the odds.

It's your adventure too.

The process of concocting, building and honing a deck takes some serious thought, and the result says something about a player's personality.

This personal connection to the game is something that its designers have recognised and sought to encourage. The card *Demonic Pact*, for instance, gives a range of powerful benefits while it's in play, but after three turns it causes them to lose the game. It's a Faustian pact, and the onus is on the player to either end the game or find a way to negate its effects before they pay the ultimate price. It's fun, it's dramatic, but crucially, it engages the player in the fiction of the games universe, making them a character in a story rather than a faceless card-shuffler.

That level of engagement isn't confined to *Magic*. The co-operative disease-fighting game *Pandemic* creates a similar sense of characters. Players become specialists with an organisation similar to, but legally distinct from, the Centre for Disease Control, battling to contain and eradicate outbreaks of different diseases around the globe, and a big part of the game revolves around discussions within the group, determining how best to respond to developing threats in different parts of the world.

Crucially, though, each player takes on an individual role on the team, and each role comes with its own special ability which can assist their efforts against worldwide plague. They might be particularly adept at treating the infected, exchanging genetic information or conducting research on vaccines. It means that every player has a distinct responsibility on the team, and in the right circumstances, any player can be the hero who prevents a disastrous epidemic or develops an elusive cure to a particularly virulent virus.

The result is that players feel an intense connection to the character they control, and that's something that was raised to another level in the follow-up *Pandemic Legacy*. It uses the same formula, but adds a rich, ongoing story mode, with characters who develop new abilities or suffer psychological scars as the campaign plays out from one game to the next. Once you've spent time with a character, built a personal history with them, shepherded them through triumph and disaster, there's an emotional investment that makes it hard to let go. Maybe that's why, in spite of the fact that any player can take control of any character, players in my group found themselves taking on the same roles over and over again.

Of course, the potential to slip into a role depends to a great extent on the depth of a game's setting. A game like *Descent*, a dungeon-crawling adventure game with a detailed world to explore and variety of customisable characters to control, has greater scope for RPG-like levels of immersion than purely abstract games like draughts, chess or *Connect Four*.

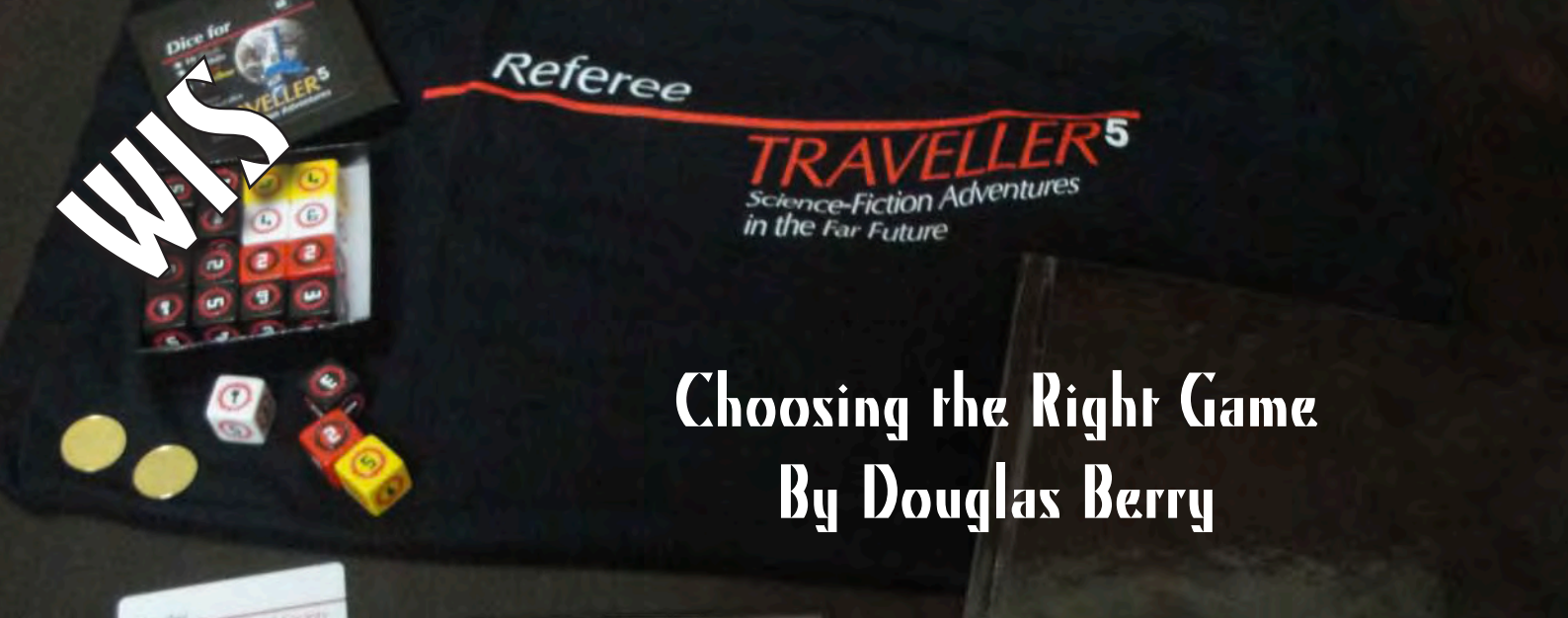
But even where a game lacks any kind of fictional hook, it can still subtly change players' personalities. When we sit down to play, we become slightly different people. The rules that govern our interactions change. We're less concerned with appearing nice or accommodating than we are with winning a contest of skill or intelligence. We may not become wizards, elves or warriors from the distant future, but we do turn into more competitive versions of ourselves - a process that seems to scratch a universal human itch.

Perhaps that's why some of the most enduring friendships of my life have been formed around games. When we step outside or ourselves for the purpose of play, we ironically show sides of our personality that we normally keep concealed. When we do that together, there's an honesty and a vulnerability that can form the foundations of lasting relationships.

"In role-playing games, SF and fantasy have exploded into psychotherapy."

~Brian Aldiss





Choosing the Right Game

By Douglas Berry

Over the past forty years, there have been dozens of different games published in the role-playing field. From the earliest days of *Chainmail* and *Dungeons & Dragons* to the latest new ideas and reissues of older games with new updated rules, the question of what to play can be daunting.

The first question has to be deciding which genre to play in. If everyone wants an epic fantasy, then choose a game that supports that idea. But selecting the right game system can be more of a challenge. This is where the attitudes of the players come in. The idea of four basic types of player was first described by Glen Blacow in an article for *Different Worlds* #10 (Oct 1980). There have been numerous refinements and additions since then, but these strains are a good start in helping to decide what game system to choose.

The first is the Power Gamer, a player who most enjoys the game when it delivers a focus on tactics and/or combat. This kind of person is likely to enjoy playing a character that has a minimum of personality (often, they play a character that is simply an extension of the player). This kind of player enjoys short, intense gaming experiences. The consequences of a failed action are minimized for this player, who will roll up a new character and return to the fray without much thought for the storyline implications of that action. Power gamers want to defeat enemies and grow in ability in a clearly defined way. They want rewards that increase their ability to defeat ever greater foes. They are the “hack and slash” types who want nothing more than to kick in the door, kill the monsters, and take the loot.

The best systems for a Power Gamer would probably be the traditional class and level schemes found in *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Pathfinder*. Rewards in these games directly improve the ability to deal damage and are clearly laid out. Power Gamers might also like games that are part of the “Old School Renaissance” such as *Labyrinth Lord* or *Basic Fantasy*. These games are deliberate throwbacks to the rules of the 1970s, and are designed for the feel of that era. Don’t expect a lot of character role-playing from your power gamers, but give them a monster to slay, and they’ll be happy. Power gamers are best matched with Thinkers, and get bored in a party with more than a couple of Character Actors and Storytellers.

Thinkers (also known as Wargamers) are players who most enjoys the game when it delivers a focus on combat and/or strategy. This kind of person is likely to enjoy min-maxing a character, spending hours out of game to find every conceivable advantage available in the system to deliver maximum damage from behind maximum protection while minimizing the vulnerabilities of the character, even if the min-maxing produces results that are seemingly illogical or impossible. This player wants to solve puzzles and can keep track of long chains of facts and clues. Thinkers tend to see the game as a conflict between Game Master and player, with a need to defeat the GM’s plans. Thinkers love puzzles and elaborate traps, and will enjoy unraveling a mystery plot.

When choosing a game for Thinkers, character skills are very important. Games like *Runequest* or *Call of Cthulhu* both provide skill-heavy systems that don’t bog down. *GURPS* is also a good choice for the Thinker as it has endless options for character creation and a skill-driven system. Thinkers will get a little more into character than Power Gamers, but to them winning is the point of playing. Expect them to work hard to take down everything you throw at them. Thinkers work well with Power Gamers, although they may get annoyed at the latter’s tendency to smash everything, and can work with Character Actors and Storytellers.

A Character Actor is a player who most enjoys the game when it delivers a focus on tactics and/or story. This kind of person is likely to enjoy the act of theater: using voice, posture, props, etc. to express a character’s actions and dialog. This player will make suboptimal choices (from an external perspective) to ensure that the character’s actions are “correct” from the perspective of the character’s motivations, ethics, and knowledge. Character Actors love detailing every aspect of their character, and tend to play very different types in different games. These players live for personal interactions with non-player characters and intelligent monsters. Even in combat, the Character Actor will play his role to the hilt, never dropping out of character for a moment.

Point-based systems like *GURPS* or *The HERO System* allow Character Actors to create the detailed personas they love. Rules-light games like *FUDGE* or *FATE* are perfect for groups of Character Actors, as there is little die-rolling and the systems award good role-play in the game. *Pendragon*, along with White Wolf's *World of Darkness* series, are both perfect for Character Actors, with their focus on family/clan history and interactions. Accept that the Character Actor will want the spotlight at least once every game session, and ties his view of a good time to being able to act out his chosen role, and you'll have a happy player. Character Actors and Power Gamers do not tend to get along.

Finally, the Storyteller is a player who most enjoys the game when it delivers a focus on strategy and/or story. This kind of person finds enjoyment from the logical progression of the narrative of the scenario. There should be a beginning, a middle, and an end. Characters should develop over time in reaction to their experiences. This player will look for a non-rules answer to inconsistencies or anachronisms in the game experience. Storytellers could also be described as Worldbuilders, as they want whatever setting they are playing in to be fully realized and rich in detail. Storytellers tend to be quite knowledgeable about history and folklore, and will demand that things be done correctly. Handled well, a Storyteller can be a great asset to the GM, as they will happily fill in details for the setting given the chance.

Along with *FATE* and *FUDGE* as mentioned above, Storytellers thrive in games that come with detailed settings in place. *Shadowrun*, *Runequest*, *Traveller* (any version), and *Ars Magica* all have excellent settings for the Storyteller to build on. More than any other type, Storytellers don't care about the rules being used. They are there to create a tale. GMs need to be sure that the campaign has an internally consistent set of rules and the scenarios unfold naturally. Storytellers will play almost any character type so long as they find an interesting story in that persona. The Storyteller wants each gaming session to progress the tale towards an end. Storytellers and Thinkers do not play well together, as their views on the object of the game conflict.

These are just guidelines. When putting a game together, ask the prospective players to list three goals for themselves in the game. This will let you identify types and plan accordingly. With some preparation and compromise, you can have a happy party in any of these games with a mix of player types. The main thing is to have a game where everyone is having their chance to enjoy the game and do what they want to do in the campaign.

Happy Gaming!





As the son of a market researcher I am aware that it is difficult to create a product that is marketable for everyone. How then does a developer make their game noticeable and attractive to its target audience? The 'hook' is the key.

The hook might be the 'Why was this game not thought of before?' effect. One example is the successful *Vampire: The Masquerade* by White Wolf, in which players took on characters that were traditionally monsters by their very nature, yet inhabited a rich world of clans, bloodlines and dark rivalries. This was a unique hook for a while, though arguably it owed some of its origin to the earlier *Ars Magica*. White Wolf then produced a series of *World of Darkness* fillers; *Werewolf*, *Mage*, *Changeling*, and more. They were essentially the same *Vampire: The Masquerade* hook rebranded each time, but were undeniably successful.

Other companies were not slow to emulate the *World of Darkness* formula. The little known *Immortal: The Invisible War*, by a company long since forgotten, boasted of its originality but was essentially *Highlander: The Masquerade*. But it was unsuccessful and duly vanished from the shelves. Apparently the technique of copying a hook is not always enough. Likewise, friends of mine once claimed to have created a unique concept with a 'fallen angels' game, yet the PCs and NPCs still belonged to groups within factions as seen in *Vampire*. Copyright infringement was only a 'find and replace' action away.

For some players the hook is not the setting but the system. Iron Crown Enterprises' *Rolemaster*, or as some call it 'charts master' or even 'that game with more maths than action', appealed to those seeking realism and rules. This game was attractive to rules lawyers in its clever application of extenuating variables to tax the mind. If this was the game for you, then fair enough. But for me, realism has little place in dramatic fantasy, and a game of *Rolemaster* felt like 'not enough time playing a role, and too much time face down in a rule book trying to follow outlandish procedures'. If I'd wanted that I'd have stayed at work. Yet as alien as they are to me, games such as *Rolemaster* persist, and will do so as long as there are players for whom this devotion to dogged realism exists (within their fantasy worlds).

Elsewhere, the hook of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (WFRP) was for me the appeal of 'low fantasy' in a simple system. The characters, though of mean origins, are marked for greatness but you could not peak too soon in this system. Likewise old-school *D&D*, though higher fantasy, was similar in its simplicity, and the clearly set levels of characters allowed games to be pitched accordingly, as well as indicating achievement. For some the familiarity of 'generic fantasy' is the hook. You don't need to buy into a complex background to play, or swallow eight volumes of rules. Generic fantasy systems like *D&D* and *Tunnels and Trolls* have endured, though it may be argued that they have lasted because they did it first. Newer games would need their own unique selling points.

For some games their gimmick burned too brightly and briefly. *Paranoia* was a hilariously fun system but after one game the novelty wore off. Like a good sitcom the situation had to propagate a series of differing scenarios rather than hem them in.

TSR's *Marvel Superheroes* game was one in which character generation was attractive but sadly more fun than playing the game. Part of the hook here was being able to create your own hero. This could be chosen but better still was when the GM allowed creation to be random. For example, my character had a flying surfboard, fire powers and a bull whip. The hero still looked like Conan in a leather jacket, but I was young, please cut me some slack. Although the games lacked originality this was tempered by the ability to adventure in a popular, well known franchise. And there we have the next hook type: the franchise...

One of the most successful RPGs based upon a franchise was *Star Wars* by West End Games. The chance to be a Jedi, or have a shot at the Kessel Run, or even bullseye womprats on Tatooine is not to be missed. The background is known well enough to nearly everyone and you can jump straight into the action, even in the later versions with more admin for character creation. The system is also flexible enough that I even played, in this galaxy a long time ago (and far, far away), a hitchhiker called Fluke. Trust me froods, you can blind a Stormtrooper quite effectively with a beach towel. While being part of an existing franchise is an obvious selling point, loyalty to that franchise is vital to keeping some players happy. There is always the risk of 'jumping the shark'. So a hitchhiker may be a step too far for some, as may introducing Cybermen to Sunnysdale for example.

Whatever the hook may be, it is only the initial point of contact for the potential player. The game itself needs to sustain interest and keep the players engaged long after the honeymoon period. Like a good 1920s façade it will entice and encourage the players to enter your domain, but keeping them there of their own free will relies upon the game content. It is important therefore that your hook does not misrepresent the gameplay.

We are back to demographics. A game developer should know their target audience. If judged correctly a game's fan base, and therefore customer base, will stick with that game in the long term. It is the curse of the ill-judged gimmick that the core rules are purchased only to gather dust on a double stacked bookshelf.

A well-judged game will be flexible enough to accommodate all player types; the dominant logical leader; the introverted angst-ridden teen; the extrovert performer; or even the cold rules lawyer in black at the back.

For this ageing freeform player and occasional GM I like nothing more than playing in a simple low fantasy game with moderate rules and a GM with instant encyclopaedic recall of the plot, systems and universe. Most of all I like the whimsy of another world that I can get drawn into and not be pulled back out by 'real world' issues such as rules or charts. Can someone write me that game please?





A Messenger Conversation Collected During a Bris From Aurora Celeste

- Cool
- That is some stained glass motif
- Happy colors! Lightnig Bolt light-
ning bolt!
- (I chose to respond with magic
missile and I want to roll for a
mind control saving throw against
hypnotizing colors.)

- Your son rolled a 20 for that
one.

- He was much more entertained
by the yartzeit lights

- Critical Hit but it left him vul-
nerable to a back stab. Unfortu-
nate.

- I'd recommend he try a rallying
yell to buff the party's resistance
and THACO as he has already
taken a status damage to his hit
points and the kid is lucky but
distracted.

- They better get their heads in
the game if they hope to beat the
mohel and his +2 glaive

- This is going in the book

- Happy to help

CLIP

Meeting Gary Gygax by Steve Dean

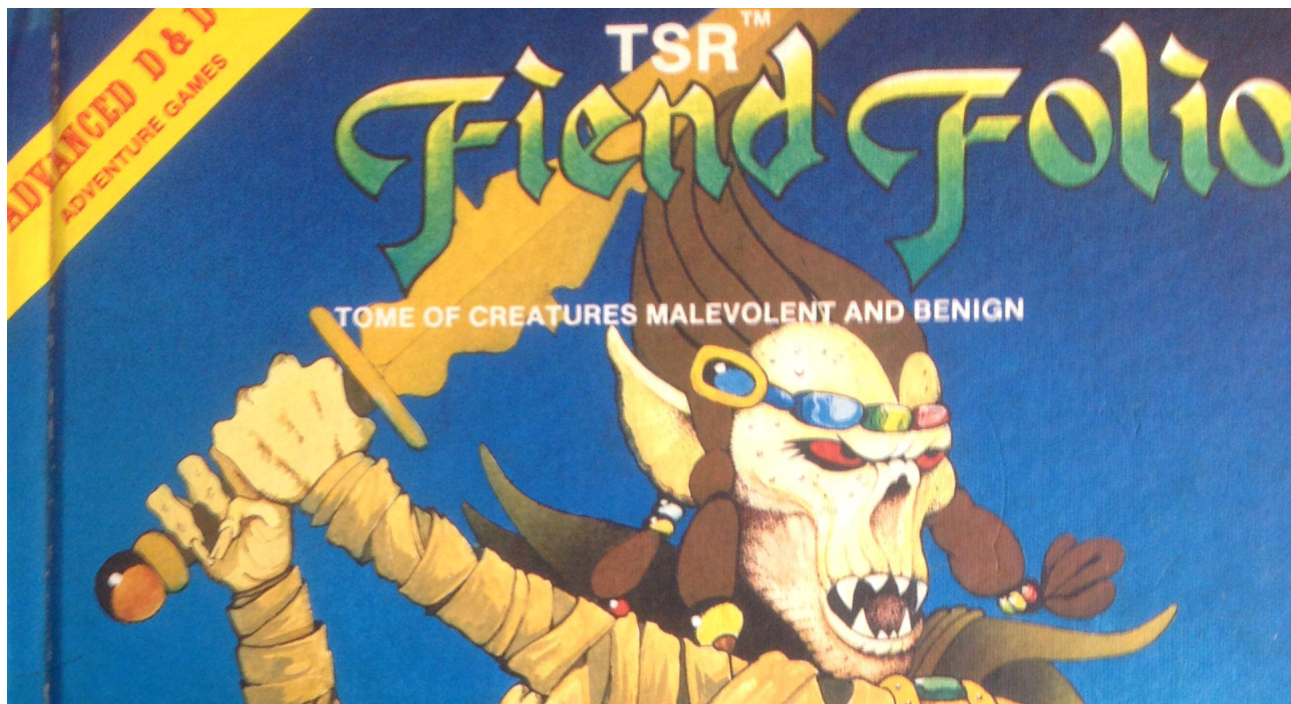
It was 1980 when I was introduced to *Dungeons & Dragons*. A fat 14 year old with a huge interest in fantasy both in fiction and in films. Along came a new Physics teacher to my school in Blackpool clutching an *AD&D* starter set. He started an after school club and it wasn't long before he and six pupils including me were adventuring a couple of nights a week. By the time I'd finished my O levels I was a 12th Level Paladin. Wish I could remember his name. I still play and DM 5th edition *D&D* now and I'd love to thank him.

In 1981 TSR, who sold the pewter miniatures, ran a campaign to increase sales of the box sets of figures. They would put a golden figure in 10 boxes and those lucky buyers would be able to send their figure back to TSR and get \$500 worth of free products. I bought a few boxes at Beatties in Blackpool and was stunned to find one of the golden figures.

I contacted TSR immediately but was hugely disappointed to be told the competition was only available to residents of USA and Canada. Still I was only 15 so took it on the chin but my Dad was from Yorkshire and totally pig headed. He contacted Don Turnbull, who was the UK Managing Director of TSR, and told him in no uncertain terms that this was unfair as his company had, in effect, saved \$500 and therefore I deserved something at least.

A couple of weeks later I received an invite to come meet Don and the King himself, Gary Gygax, on one of his visits to the UK. Bloody hell I was excited. As it transpired the time would be relatively short as the TSR UK board meeting over-ran. Nevertheless I was ushered into the room to be met by a chubby man with a massive grin on this face. I was so nervous but he put me at ease, chatting away about the character I was running, what adventure I was playing, whether I was a DM at any stage, what was my favourite monster.

Unusually for me I had taken nothing to be signed from my small collection at the time but Don Turnbull brought over a copy of the recently released *Fiend Folio*, which they both autographed for me. I still have that book to this day; unlike the gold figure which I gave to a girl I was dating in the mid 80's. Always a romantic and an idiot. I should have run a Bard!



Fiend FolioTM

TOME OF CREATURES MALEVOLENT AND BENIGN

AN ALPHABETICAL LISTING
OF MONSTERS FOR USE WITH
ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONSTM
ADVENTURES, INCLUDING ATTACKS,
DAMAGE, SPECIAL ABILITIES,
AND DESCRIPTIONS; RANDOM
ENCOUNTER TABLES BY LEVEL;
AND MORE.

Edited by Don Turnbull,
Managing Director of TSR UK, Ltd.

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Chris Baker,
Jeff Dee,
Emmanuel,
Albie Flore,
Alan Hunter,
Russ Nicholson,
Erol Otus,
Jim Roslof,
David C. Sutherland III,
Bill Willingham,
Polly Wilson,
Tony Yates.

Cover by Emmanuel

TSR Hobbies, Inc.
POB 756
LAKE GENEVA, WI 53147



Best wishes and
good gaming!
Don Turnbull

The image shows the cover of the 'Official Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual'. The title is in a large, stylized font with a dragon head integrated into the ampersand. A '2009' date stamp is in the top right corner. A large, diagonal 'CLIP' watermark is overlaid on the left side of the cover.

Official Advanced Dungeons & Dragons[®] MONSTER MANUAL

Put Down the Monster Manual...

by John Dodd

You've all been there before, get down the dungeon, hack your way through a few hundred creatures, return with all their treasure. Find another dungeon where another hundred creatures wait for you, kill them all, return with their treasure. It's the classic dungeon crawl, and its spawned hundreds of games off the idea of doing just that. Most of the video game staples such as Torchlight and Diablo make a game out of going around hacking and collecting, but they ignore the basic principle of what a monster should be...

Monstrous...

I've been hunting monsters in games for many many years, and I've come to realise that there are two types of creatures that adventurers come up against, the ones that are just a danger and the ones that the adventurers are *actually* scared of.

The Monsters, and the Monstrous...

Anything from garden variety dogs to land sharks, anything with a chance to hit the adventurers can be a threat, and that's enough to make them dangerous, but not really enough to make them monstrous. It doesn't matter how big the creature is, how many attacks it has, how many special abilities it has, if you know its stats you can kill it, and so it is with anything in a game, every death star has its exhaust port, and so it is with monsters.

An example of this is the Tarrasque.

The Tarrasque (Barring some Huge Ancient dragons and the Gods) is the most dangerous thing in the D&D world, but it's got nothing in common with any adventurers that come up against it. It's just an engine of destruction, and while that's a fearsome thing, you either kill it or it kills you, and either way, that's not scary, it's an on/off switch and we as adventurers can deal with that. You're beneath its notice, if you're in its way, that's your problem, not its.

It's not scary, it's a numerical challenge that most people avoid.

Contrast that with the presentation of the Xenomorph from the film *Alien*.

Put an Alien against a Tarrasque and the Tarrasque wouldn't even break stride, but ask which one makes for a more interesting encounter and almost certainly it'll be the Alien.

But why is that?

Because on some level, we understand the Alien, it's not just looking to rampage, it's not mindless (in fact, much is made of how intelligent it *actually* is, and we'll come to that in a while) it's doing what we do, only it's not us and it never will be, and that's where the best monsters come from.

Inside us...

No doubt many will have heard of Tuckers Kobolds, wherein a group of low level kobolds with nothing but cunning and tactics took down a group of level twelve characters. Each one of the player characters individually was more than a match for the whole kobold tribe if fought on a level playing field. These kobolds were playing smart though, they led characters into traps where they could pour oil in and set it alight, or drop the characters in deep water still wearing their armour, lure them into areas where they couldn't move because they were too big, but the kobolds had no such restriction, and as a result, the characters got butchered wholesale and that's where the real monsters lie, not in the appearance or their special abilities but how you play them.

Back to the example of the Alien...

In the first film, it was invulnerable, unstoppable, everything the crew tried didn't make any difference to it. They fought against what it was the *last* time they encountered it, but by then it had moved on, it saw what they'd brought last time and upped its game to match. If the crew had managed to get it in a place where numbers or weapons could be brought to bear, then they might have had a chance, but it didn't let them have that chance.

In this film, the GM was playing smart...

Move on to Aliens, in this one, the Aliens had already wiped out the colony when the marines got there, so there were hundreds of them to contend with.

Hundreds

Just like the one in the first film, hundreds more eggs just waiting, and above them all, the Queen, just like a regular Alien except built like a dinosaur... If the GM had played smart with this one, there was no way the players were going home with the win from this. But in this game, one of the players had got a copy of the Monster Manual and checked the entry for the Alien, where in small letters at the bottom was written the words, "Vulnerable to 10mm caseless ammunition." Characters immediately went to the weapons locker, got a few backpacks full of 10mm and went a hunting...

And this is why we should put the monster manual away, or at least not let players have access to it...

So what's the difference between the two?

Alien is a horror film, it has a single monster that's truly monstrous, Aliens is an action film with hundreds of monsters that are little more than cannon fodder. The only times when you were concerned about the enemy in the second film is when you didn't know what they were doing. The second they showed up, they were no longer something to be worried about, just point and fire, so it is with monsters. When you present a monster to the world, don't give the players chance to look it up, or all you'll get is "It's one of those, this is what we do about it." Use several versions, change the potential for the creatures so that the GM can use the base stats if they wish or change fundamentals about them. If it only has one set of statistics, and they've seen what it looks like in full colour, no character will fear it, no player will respect it. If it's something they don't know about, you'll see a different side to the players in short order.

And why is this?

One of the things that most adventurers fear is something that can hunt them back. In the quiet words of Hemingway, there is no hunting like the hunting of a man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter. So it is with the best monsters, they don't wait for the adventurers to come to their home and raid for treasure, they go out looking, and the people they're most likely to encounter are the ones that are on the raid...

A good monster has motivation, it has ideas, it's not waiting for something to happen, and when something does happen, it doesn't go back to its lair and wait for it to happen again, that's something that happened in the early days of playing. When the players go out and kill monsters, have those monsters retaliate. Play the monsters as if they were players themselves, make the most insignificant of challenges memorable ones, have the players think twice before taking on anything, and if they do take something on, be damn sure they finished it off.

Because those who have hunted smart monsters and won, never care for anything else thereafter...

Playing the Game by James Bacon

I walked into the American Book centre in Amsterdam with Dad, then in its old site, on the Kalverstratt, a narrow shop it went up many floors. My dad would take us there, and I would head for the upper most floors where some comics and books existed, I was finding my way with *2000AD* having had some annuals, and I found a hardback book, which seemed to be a game, but looked so much more like an encyclopedia.

I was well impressed and spent a lot of time looking through it. This was the hardback edition of *Judge Dredd* the RPG. This game based on the *Warhammer Fantasy RPG* system and produced by Games Workshop. It was in a new format, having previously been available in a box, with maps and cut outs and separate books. Here everything was in one heavy tome, details, information, data and I was a bit enthralled.

As ever on holidays, we were allowed a 'special present' something that would signify we were doing something unusual. To be honest an Irish family having their summer holiday in the Netherlands was bloody unusual, in the eighties, but anyhow.

So, the days went by and we all asked for something, and I said I'd like this book. Dad was shrewd as hell, but also an enabler, Jesus we enabled each other in dreadful ways. And so, on our subsequent trip into Amsterdam we went in, to consider it, and he had a good look, and asked if I would actually play it, seeing as it was a thing for a group it seemed, and whether I would get value from it.

Dad could see I was keen and then wondered about a Boxed expansion pack, next to it, *Slaughter Margin*, I was just expecting the Book, but he did one of those things, and so I had both in the bag and on the way. My head was stuck in this book, reading forwards and backwards, learning about Mega City 1 and all the Judges and I loved it.

I never once played the game. Not once. I bought the *Judge Dredd Companion*, it had an Anderson Cover, I bought a supplement, called *Judgement Day*, and bought some of the metal figures and I would read it all, read the game play, read the set up, sit and imagine how it would all go, and then read it again and imagine it all over again.

I consider that now, some twenty five years later, and I got a lot of pleasure from it. The books and box are in a comic box with the more important *2000AD* items, Sci-Fi and *Judge Dredd* specials, issue 500, the 10th anniversary issue, items that mean an awful lot, the Revolver Romantic special signed by Garth Ennis that all Dublin fans knew about, Progs signed by various artists, and so when I saw it there a short time ago, I had a look and remembered just how much I enjoyed it and how right dad was to let me have it.

Shortly after finding *Judge Dredd* the RPG, I was also invited to play 2nd Edition AD&D with some neighbourhood teenagers around my own age. That was OK. I was actually given rule books, a few people whom I knew seemed to know all about it, and it was much more common than I realised. I did live in my own world a lot of the time, and really didn't pay any attention to much beyond comics down the back. So I enjoyed that, although it suffered from inexperienced Dungeon Mastering. The social side was OK, I suppose, but we were teenagers and all young, and to be honest easily distracted by reading one another passages from classic erotic literature, the girls reading to the boys and visa versa. Playing a game seemed, well the wrong game to be playing.

I would enjoy reading the source books, they were pretty beautiful and lovely, and the whole playing part was nice, but not ever what I had imagined. I never suggested that we play Dredd, although later I got to play a table top game called *Block Mania*, but it was no where near as involved as the RPG promised and I looked quite endearingly at a *Rogue Trooper* game that Julian West brought to an Octocon in the 90's, but I was too busy by that stage, for a game. A con was on.

I picked up some other Source Books, the *Star Wars* RPG from West End Games was pretty much all there was around 1990, if you were a *Star Wars* fan, the dearth of material was dreadful, I remember falling head over heels for Carol Titelman's *Art of Star Wars* and paying a decent amount for a set of Blue Prints by Ballantine Books, in a plastic looking leather case, so the RPG offered considerable insight, and I would pick up books, if cheap second hand, before the onslaught that *Heir to the Empire* and *Dark Empire* seemed to herald from Lucasfilm.

I met Randy Shepard while hanging out in the cabin bar, in the Crest Hotel, it was halfway between the Party floor and an entrance, as the building seemed to be built on a hill, and I spent most nights here, drinking heavily during the 1995 Worldcon. Randy was distinctive in his Texas flag cummerbund and bow tie, charming, built like a quarterback and with a confident air about him, he was a good bloke.

Randy met many Irish fans and moved to Dublin a few years later, and so at some stage around 2002, expressed interest in running a RPG game session. *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* 3rd edition.

Now this was a Role Playing game. Randy was superlative, later in our sequence of sessions, he unpacked 3.5 edition material from the mecca that was Wizards which he had been sent as he was a Beta tester. Randy made all the difference. I was really into it, as we all were, as we made our weekly journey out to The Blackrock market where in a very bohemian internet cafe, we would sit around after hours and play the game.

I would meet Mick and Phil O'Connor and had assured them of a lift home, and back to the safety of the north side of Dublin following the game session. Joining us were Frank Darcy and his daughter Niamh, Conor Stephens and Ali Sugg.

Randy made the game come alive, he knew what he was doing, encouraged us to be inventive. Instead of choosing the characters we wanted to be, although that was fine, he also suggested we choose characters who would be an anathema, or tricky to imagine. I ended up being a halfling lock picking expert, thief coward. Mick was a Bard, and Phil was a warrior of gargantuan scale, and ferocity, and played her character, like a tank going straight into the action. Frank was more calm and thoughtful as were the rest of the gang.

It was a great weekly game, on Sunday night. We all took to it very well, and hilarity would often ensue, I recall at one stage in a crisis Mick suggested he play a tune to motivate us, and played it so dead straight, working out what to play while I was running away and Phil was charging in, it was fabulous. Mick though in many ways, and Phil too knew D&D. Long time computer game players, Mick and Phil had taken to *Diablo* like ducks to water and Mick loved *Baldur's Gate*, an AD&D computer game.

I used to bring along things, that could be used, paper stained in tea, with old script written on it, cheese, brown bread and chunks of baked ham in greaseproof paper, and tools that might have been good for stealing, and all would earn extra XP. Initially I just brought the stuff cause I thought it would be fun, and more emersive, so the XP was a gift.

Of course, we were all novices, and there was an instance where we came across a Dwarf who we, collectively decided, we should just kill, as he seemed very patronising. Despite the DM clarifying a few times whether this was what we went to do, we went on, mostly following Phil, of course, when the Dwarf rolled, so many dice were produced that we knew we were toast and we were and soon, quickly, weeks of play seemed to be done in.

Phil suggested we pretend that didn't happen, and Randy was utterly aghast, shocked even, but soon, myself and Mick were saying, 'yes a Dream sequence' and Randy was horrified, already looking to initiate new characters and stats, there was much cajoling and urging and looks of fear, and he relented and to much laughter and even cheering and I thought this was obviously not how the game was meant to be played, but didn't mind. Onwards we went on our quest.

I cannot even remember why we stopped playing, but they were great evenings, and I really enjoyed them. Yet the idea of playing a RPG is so far down my priority list now, that it just would not happen.

Mick, Phil and Frank are now all dead, real dead, the Dungeon Master of real life was unrelenting in sticking to the rules of mortality, no chance of a dream sequence, or a play over, and we didn't even get a chance to roll new stats for new characters, just the end of the game for them. So enjoy it while it lasts, play and enjoy and have a great time.

