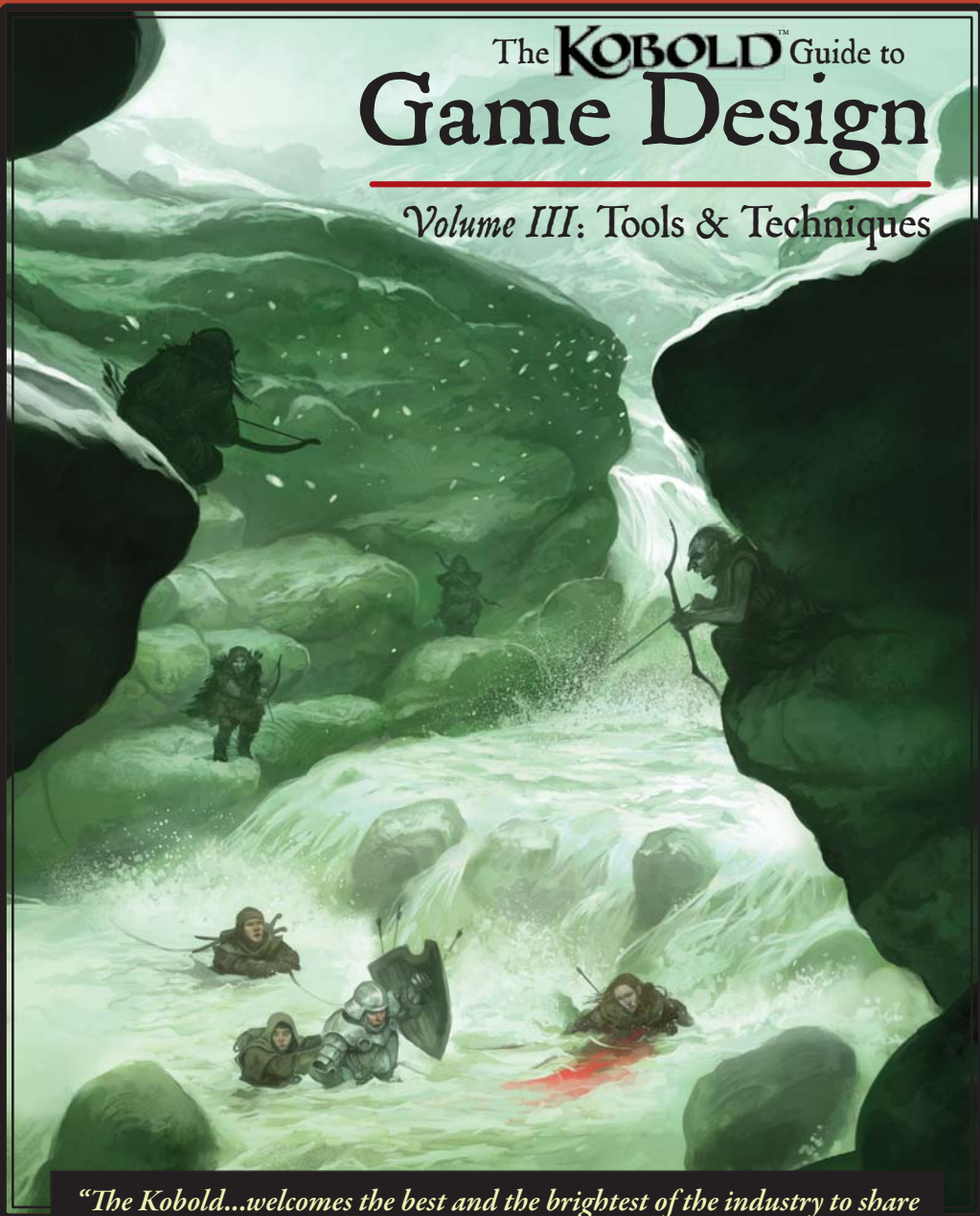


OPEN DESIGN™ presents

The KOBOLD™ Guide to Game Design

Volume III: Tools & Techniques



"The Kobold...welcomes the best and the brightest of the industry to share their knowledge of game design." Jeff Grubb, FORGOTTEN REALMS designer

by Wolfgang Baur, Monte Cook,
Ed Greenwood, Rob Heinsoo, and Colin McComb

The KOBOLD Guide to Game Design

Volume III: Tools & Techniques



Essays by

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The KOBOLD Guide to Game Design Volume 3: *Tools & Techniques*

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Foreword

Chimeras

The design of roleplaying games is a relatively new art as these things are measured, and it is one founded on a fundamental tension.

Most games are creatures entirely of rules: turns, sequence, resources, playing pieces, luck and probability, tactics. In extreme cases, such designs are matters of pure geometry and skill, such as chess or go. One mind is pitted against another, and a victory determined.

Roleplaying games (RPGs) sort of mess up that neat definition of game design. No one “wins.” RPGs are entertainments, closer to films and novels than to chess or go. A roleplaying game is, in fact, a chimera of rules elements and story elements, with both necessary to its character.

In this third volume of the **KOBOLD GUIDE TO GAME DESIGN**, we hear from masters of both rules and story, and examine the space in between. What makes a basic game tick? What were the ground rules and foundational decisions of the newest edition of **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS**?

More than that, this volume digs at the intersection of the two pillars of roleplaying design. When we add story elements to our games of pure tactics and mechanics, that matter of Gygaxian invention when wargaming met the freeform story play of David Wesely and Dave Arneson’s Braunstein—well, what then? How does one design mechanics for something as liquid and protean as story? How can rules be made to jump out of cases and be tools for creative play without victory conditions?

Frankly, what works in story, and what works in rules? Good RPG designers can do both, though most specialize in one pillar or the other.

The answers are here, from *New York Times*-bestselling author Ed Greenwood, from **FOURTH EDITION DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** lead design Rob Heinsoo, from **THIRD EDITION DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** lead designer Monte Cook, and from **PLANESCAPE: TORMENT** video game designer Colin McComb, as well as from yours truly. Let’s open up the seamy underbelly of this strange beast, neither book nor game, and yet popular for going on 40 years now.

Wolfgang Baur
April, 2010

What is Design?

Wolfgang Baur

The most obvious question when it comes time to think about game design is not, as you might expect, “What is design?”

The question I get most often is how to design, in particular how to approach the mathematical and mechanical elements of design. Some of that is addressed elsewhere in this volume.

The second most-common questions have to do with how to go about pitching design to a publisher, how to refine and playtest a failed design, and so forth. Prior volumes of the **KOBOLD Guides to Game Design** have addressed the practical elements.

To my mind, the first question—defining game design—is maybe less practical but is clearly more important to understanding what it means to design well and what it means to create novelty, excite gamers, and publish a breakthrough game or setting. If the work you do on design is entirely a matter of mechanical refinement, pitching, and playtest, you can be a successful game designer. You can be even more successful if you think about the underlying nature of design. I might go so far as to say that newcomers wonder about how, but veterans dwell on what and why, especially in those cases where the why seems to be changing as gaming culture changes.

So, I’ve come back to the question of what constitutes design more and more over the last year. I pretend to no particularly amazing insight into the universal

human impulse for games, but I've had certain lessons brought home to me through sheer repetition and observation. I think I'm finally ready to make a stab at it.

Defining Our Work

When we sit down as game designers and think about the work we do, there are a few things going on. We are imagining a particular audience with a particular set of expectations, from the reading level required to the style of game we're considering. We think about commercial elements and audience appeal: What will draw players in? And we think about immersion and replay value: What victory conditions or encounter descriptions are most compelling?

When I am designing a game, I am thinking about what set of rules will create an engaging experience of play for the intended audience in a new or existing mode or style of play.

Design is . . .

Design is its own discipline, but it always borrows and builds on other modes of creative work. Design is:

- art
- mathematics and probability
- literature and language
- geography and history
- the building of a field of play
- the encouragement of repeated patterns of behavior
- iterative rule-making to improve player competition
- rule-making to require player cooperation
- a fusion of exploratory play and mastery over time
- the study of player psychology and the conscious manipulation of behavior

The nature of game design is that it requires understanding many related fields. It's both a matter of syncretic thought and analytical or reductive thought. That's part of the appeal; in some games your work is a matter of pure geometry and probability and event timing, such as the creation of board game rules or arcade game rules where the shape of the play area and the appearance of resources and objects must be precisely calibrated to retain player attention, provide frequent stimulus, and permit a variety of successful strategies. In other game types, you must explain victory conditions, customs, landscapes, tools, and characters. These are less about timing and geometry and more about engaging a sense of wonder and discovery as the player uncovers layers of the setting and new challenges in the game. If you find yourself wondering whether you are solving the right problems, consider the list here and see what other approaches to the problem might cut through to improve the heart of the play experience.

Design is the creation of play experiences at a remove from play itself. That is, as the designer, your work enables new experiences in play for others. If you are doing it exceptionally well, you are inventing new game genres and new play styles; that is, entirely new methods, styles, and systems of play. You use technology, art, and your own vision of what it means to play to create that new game. Design includes the creation of new spaces to explore, and the creation of new rules and systems to govern play.

Each type of design—new rules, new experiences, and even new modes or play styles—requires a separate set of skills.

New Rules

This is the simplest and most important element of game design: What are the rules of the game? What tactics do they enable? What odds do they set? What behavior do they promote or discourage? What emergent properties derive from the rules? Are the rules extensible? Are the rules complete and self-contained? Can the rules be summarized? Can they be programmed? What victory conditions do they require? What are the consequences of failure? How do they encourage repeated play?

Most of all, do they reward the player for skill, for mastery? Or are they essentially functions of time and money spent? Both approaches may be correct for different audiences; not every design need be a game of skill, as games on Facebook so amply demonstrate.

New Experiences

Games allow us to imagine the impossible or at least the exotic, so fantasy and other genre games should enable new experiences: dragon riding, interstellar trade with hostile species, assassinations in the Middle Ages, or the seduction of a Bond babe in Monte Carlo. Even a relatively straightforward driving game needs to provide a complete experience of speed, control, and competition.

This property of game design is especially crucial for franchise games that derive most of their attraction over time: sports games, new editions of existing titles. It's vital that a designer can do "same but different" to keep a well-loved series, setting, or property fresh and engaging.

New Modes of Play

New modes require an ability to imagine new styles of play: alternate reality games (ARGs), first-person shooters, roleplaying without a dungeon master (DM). New rules and systems are required to support those new styles of play—but for the most part, these new systems are variations on existing systems. It's rare that a truly original rule shows up, such as the deck construction rules that

made **MAGIC: THE GATHERING** (MtG) a breakout hit. The other rules of MtG (resource management and attack/defense) were mostly variations on existing rules in other game styles.

If you can generate an idea on the level of **MTG**, refine it, and bring it to market, I've certainly got nothing to teach you. On the other hand, most of role-playing and massively multiplayer online (MMO) game design is something else: the creation of play experiences within an existing rules framework or an existing game engine. That level of design is an area of the craft I've practiced for years, finding the pivot points within a complex body of rules and the richest veins of exploration and story potential in a setting. This is what makes definitions of design so difficult; it's many different types of work.

To me, design is less about engagement and immersion than it is ultimately about play. The time spent making decisions before, during, and after the game is only partly immersive. Certainly game design assists a player's immersion through the careful choice of rules and components, art for game boards and game pieces, cards, animations, flavor text. But in many games the visual and tactile elements are little more than set dressing. For example, the European style of game design (and the Hasbro style for card and roleplaying games, to a lesser degree) focuses primarily on rules design; art, graphics, and flavor are added later and may be fairly arbitrary. That approach works extremely well for board games and card games, less so for story games and roleplaying games.

*"Game design is a function of human attention:
getting it, directing it, and keeping it."*

Design is a Bit Like Mind Control

Design is the conscious work done to manipulate the behavior of the game's players. This sounds worse than it is. You're trying to design choices and how those choices are presented to the players. A more realistic wording might be that game design is a function of human attention: getting it, directing it, and keeping it. A well-designed game commands the player's attention at frequent intervals, directs that attention to turns or events, and keeps that attention through various means such as social reinforcement, reward systems such as experience points (XP) and leveling, and even the timely appearance of in-game resources and materials (spawning for video games, the return of daily powers in 4th edition D&D).

The better you understand the mindset of players and DMs, the easier it is for them to engage with your design. The more esoteric or niche your design, in other words, the less players will react as your design might expect them to. This is the nature of niche RPGs: they tickle the fancy of a minority of gamers, but they still scratch an itch that goes deep into the human id, to the reptilian drive to conquer,

Amateur and Professional Design

Game design is work done at a remove, that is, at a layer of abstraction away from simply sitting down and playing a game yourself. In particular, the work of design needs to consider the needs of the audience, rather than your own needs as a gamer, to be successful. Sometimes these two will overlap heavily—that's certainly the case for DMs and many freelancers in roleplaying game design—but it's not always the case. And the more you cater to your own needs as a gamer rather than to the needs of your audience, the less professional and generally more “indie” your design will be. There's absolutely nothing wrong with indie game design, but it proceeds from an assumption that the audience is the niche player.

When you no longer see yourself as DM or audience, but design with them in mind rather than purely for yourself, you've reached a certain turning point in your career. Some game studios see this as a failing, and assume that if you are not a member of the target audience you can never understand that audience. This is patent nonsense; most of the great video game designers today are not playing twitch games, but this does not stop them from designing such games. I had been designing professionally for several years before I figured out this distinction between audience and designer, and I'm not sure I could date it or show you the product difference. But at that point, I stopped arguing over trivial points of personal preference (well, mostly) and started looking for techniques to hold two audiences (DM and player) instead of one (myself as a DM).

control, and master the world around us, to derive status and overcome enemies, to find food and resources for our tribe and family. Killing things and taking their treasure is—to my mind—a gaming variation on the hunter-gatherer culture that defined human existence for 99% of our species' existence. No wonder it's so compelling; it is bred in the bone.

Setting plus Mechanics

Let's consider the value of setting and mechanics for tabletop roleplaying games. The two are often discussed as if they were at odds, as if a player or a DM should favor “crunch” over “fluff” (both rather misleading terms) or—more literally—rules over flavor and story elements. This is a tragic mistake, because good design is not about choosing a single design dimension and pursuing it until even the most hardcore fans grow bored; it's about striking a balance between competing needs for an enjoyable play experience for different audiences. Design in this sense is about making the right trade-offs.

In terms of the RPG audiences (and most designers and fans alike agree that there are several), I'd argue that generating a satisfying play experience for these

types of games requires design of the rules and the setting in parallel. Games that fail to generate a sufficiently compelling setting will attract tactical gamers and home brewers, but will not engage a wider audience that is interested in exploring a setting, specific character tropes, and telling long-form heroic tales. Games that enjoy a rich setting but fail to deliver rules that appeal to mechanical tinkerers, tweakers, and tacticians will likewise limit their audience, and furthermore will make it difficult to support the setting with expanded rules material.

Doing both well delivers the experience players want, but many designs fail on one leg or the other. If you can use an existing and well-supported rules set, you save yourself a great deal of trouble at the possible expense of fine-tuning the mechanics to suit your story and setting needs. If you decide to build out rules first and foremost . . . Well, that's the subject of another essay in this collection. It can certainly be done, but it weakens the end result if your mechanics need to cover everything from horses to spaceships and psionics to demon summoning and gigawatt lasers. Most successful RPGs specialize in certain time periods or genres, and indie games in some cases specialize in a particular plot line (operatic drama, zombie survival, or religious orthodoxy) or assumed a particular cast of characters (Dr. Frankenstein's servants, or mice).

Why is that? Because part of design is knowing to what degree you'll need to integrate setting and rules. If you already assume zombie survival as the default setting trope, you need weapons and survival gear rules, but the characters probably won't spend a ton of time using diplomacy skills. You can spend your design time more profitably outlining the stages of zombie infection or variant chainsaw rules. Different games demand different emphases. Board games are at one end of a spectrum where rules carry the burden of play, card games are somewhere on the rules-heavy side but with story-driven exceptions like **LEGENDS OF THE FIVE RINGS**, and miniatures gaming, MMOs, and roleplaying games lean further into the setting side of things. Failure to provide enough quests and backstory is unforgivable in a roleplaying-heavy style of play. Failure to provide short, crisp, and complete mechanics is unforgivable in a board game.

What style of play your audience favors decides how much time you spend on the core rules and how much time you spend developing the setting.

Defining the Boundaries, Choosing Your Players

All too often, roleplaying game designs try to do far too much, and for years the industry largely abandoned the introductory book or box set that can be read and implemented by a new player. (It's making a comeback with the **DRAGON AGE** RPG boxed set and the 2010 **D&D** red box series.)

Those books set up the principles of gaming for people who knew nothing about roleplaying; their "what is design" core goal was to make difficult games

accessible and to provide some sense of mastery to newbies. That's a very difficult design task and depends on a sharp eye for what carries a player into the game, engages them, and moves them on to master the next elements quickly. Defining the boundaries is crucial: You need to provide enough material for a player to get started while providing enough depth so that a veteran player isn't bored.

I'd argue the task is largely impossible. The **PATHFINDER** RPG is 500+ pages long; it's newbie-hostile, and largely assumes that you have already mastered basic roleplaying concepts. The **4TH EDITION D&D** rules set requires that you subscribe to a paywall Web site to keep up with new releases and to have a decent character generator. Most players learn these games from someone who already knows them. The contradiction and the tragedy of it is that most veteran gamers disdain the idea of teaching newbies, and the intro boxes certainly assume that both the DM and players are novices. Certain war games and board games assume the same level of mastery: If you don't already have prior rules sets and components, you'll never understand the advanced version or expansion of the game.

So the first thing to do with a design is figure out who you want as your player. That single decision will inform all others after it, from the components of the game to the complexity and length of the rules set to the likely elements in an introductory adventure. If you can deliver what your player base wants, your design's odds of success increase hugely. Ignore the hardcore audience if your target audience is newbies, and vice versa.

Victory!

One element we rarely consider consciously in roleplaying game design is the victory condition, though it is the single most important rule in almost every other type of game design. Without a well-defined victory condition, a game is not a game—and yet roleplaying games violate this cardinal principle.

Or do they?

I'd argue that one way to strengthen an RPG design is by creating a set of victory or advancement conditions that reward continued or frequent play. **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** isn't remembered for this element of design, but it has exactly this element: It grants levels to player characters. And there's a general goal of advancement in every RPG. I'd take this further and say that good adventures and setting all make implicit promises of what victory looks like. It's often no better than "stop the drow and save the kingdom" or "prevent Doomsday," but that's certainly a goal.

Even if your game has frequent rewards rather than a single overarching victory condition, I'd recommend that you find those reward moments and make them clearer, brighter, and shinier. It is almost impossible to reward players too much

or too often in video games (positive reinforcement works). Use it in RPGs, not just in the form of gold and magic, but in the form of status, prestige, unique treasures, courtesans and admirers, and a sense that the heroes matter. What's the point of defeating dragons if you still can't get a beer at the pub? Make sure that heroes are acclaimed and rewarded both in and out of character.

Your Invisible Ally in Game Design

In RPGs, game design is broader than in tabletop board games or even than in video games, because as a designer you must also enlist the DM as your ally. There's no RPG without a DM willing to run your system or your scenario, so you need to succeed in inspiring those who will spend the money on the system and setting, spend the time on mastering world and rules material, and spend the effort to construct and tell their own stories in collaboration with a gaming group. Not to mention cleaning up the house and putting out the cheese and drinks every week.

This is why writing dull-but-effective mechanics is a fairly big failure of design. If you lavish care on the mechanical elements to the exclusion of flavor, no one will bother to wade through your case-style rules to actually play the game. Not all DMs, but most, will be looking for an implied setting at the very least, and most prefer a rules set that explicitly supports a particular world and/or style of play.

Likewise, if you worry only about the flavor and setting and fail to bulletproof your mechanics and rules, you may well inspire someone to play it, but disaster will ensue as soon as the game hits the table. As soon as the ludic experience of actual play falls apart around them, they will (rightfully) abandon your game system or house rule the worthwhile bits into another set of mechanics.

Go too far in either direction, and you risk indifference on the one hand, and an unplayable morass on the other.

What makes a roleplaying design work, then? If I knew the answer and could make it plain I'd be a very wealthy man. The answer is complicated, and depends on three factors: audience expectation, surprise and originality, and what I will call heightened play.

Audience Expectations

To absolutely no one's surprise, gamers are a diverse and rowdy lot who want a lot of conflicting things in their games: simplicity and play depth, great setting and easy customization, novelty and the comfort of familiar, conservative assumptions about the nature of high fantasy, SF, or the like.

For the most part, you should ignore audience expectations.

You heard me. As a game designer, you will be asked often and loudly to deliver “same but different” game designs. That’s fine if you are starting out, or if you are getting a toehold in the field. But if you really want to make a name for yourself, you’ll fail to impress by just meeting audience expectations. This is clearest when you look at the career arc of most of the major pen-and-paper designers, but it’s also true for video game and board game designers. Expanding on an existing design is a good way to keep Marketing happy, provide sales for a publisher, and cater to a fan base. It is not, in and of itself, a bad thing at all, and I’ve done plenty of such projects over the years, some of which I’m quite proud of.

The projects that really get you recognized as a designer, though, are the ones that don’t cater to expectations, and that get you out in front of what an audience asks for. No one asked Luke Crane, “Hey, give us an RPG about sentient mice with a sense of honor!” And yet the *Mouse Guard* RPG was the entirely deserving winner of major accolades and a lot of fan enthusiasm in 2009, and the game has been a huge success by indie standards. Likewise most other hits for smaller publishers. Creating a core setting and a set of mechanics that supports it is the way to go.

Go big if you can.

Surprise and Originality

So fine, perhaps I belabor the obvious when I tell you to give gamers what they don’t yet know they want. Underlying that, I believe that what gamers really want beyond a faithfulness to a game’s premise is a sense of surprise and originality. There have been dozens if not hundreds of major RPG systems in the last 35 years. There are thousands of board game designs. Why do another one? Because sequels suck, and because there’s a chance that you’ll do it better than it’s ever been done.

Originality and surprise can take many forms. Reskinning an existing rules set to serve a new master is one road to success; look at **BLUE ROSE** and the underlying **TRUE20** rules, for example, or the way that the **CALL OF CTHULHU** rules set has been reskinned in novel ways to support **BASIC ROLEPLAYING**, the **ELRIC** RPG, and others. And **DOMINION** certainly reinvented the way card games work by fusing the deck construction of **MAGIC: THE GATHERING** with a non-trading-card-game set of components. Originality may mean fusion of two disparate elements.

Alternately, you may find a new mechanic that enables a whole new form of roleplaying, or a central conceit of how the gameplay progresses around the table that leans more in a particular direction toward story gaming, tactical gaming, or even family gaming. Wonderful! Design your heart out, and I hope that gamers everywhere embrace the new paradigm.

Immersive Play

There's been a ton of discussion about immersion and its role in video games, from talking about flow (Everyone's got a theory—a few with actual data to support them!) to more obscure discussion about related topics like reward ratios, reading saccades, Skinnerian response, interface design, you name it. For the purposes of our discussion of online and tabletop roleplaying games, immersion is the sense that a player is deeply invested in their character or part in the game, and that they are playing that role with a sense of connection.

Immersion seems like a red herring. It's different for every player, and as long as designers provide a wealth of options, and graphic designers and animators provide compelling images, gamers with powerful imaginations and even casual players will find a role they like and take to it. Immersion is important, but not central to design. Immersion is a consequence of good design practices at a different level: mechanical design, character design, and world design.

While on the one hand I do want to encourage designers, I have to sound one pragmatic note of caution as well: You won't start off with an opportunity to go big. Most publishers won't gamble everything on an unknown with a neat idea unless there's very good evidence that you can carry it off. In board games, that means your game playtests insanely well. In RPGs, it usually means you've got a track record of smaller titles and achievements. In video games it usually means you'll spend years supporting senior designers before you ever have a chance to lead an A-list title.

But watch for your chance, and keep notes for what you'll do when and if an opportunity presents itself. Chance favors the prepared mind, after all, and there's no reason you can't work on your rules design, setting design, board game rules set, or video-game treatment and story arcs even if there's no publisher in sight. Investing some of your time and energy into these sorts of “trunk projects” that you keep close to hand may pay off very handsomely when there's an open call, a staff job, or just a hole in a publisher's schedule. Maybe you can wow them with material generated right then (it does happen), but think how much better prepared you'll be if you have a notebook or a hard drive crammed with good material awaiting development.

Heightened Play Experience

The part of design that I think is most fundamental is that of the heightened play experience. This is where I think good designers split from great designers, where immersion, story, mechanics, and originality all come together to lift a game from the glut of similar experiences to something special.

And it's devilishly hard to describe, but I think it boils down to concise language, escalation of conflict, and super-saturated style.

Conciseness. Part of the heightened play experience is a matter of emphasis, of honing down the language, the backstory, and the character descriptions into just a few key details that can be communicated quickly by a DM to players. The temptation for many beginning designers is to rattle on and on, and even many professionals are in love with the sound of their own keyboards clacking away. Resist the urge to just slather a design in text.

Escalation. At the same time, a great encounter design and a great adventure design both need to make every fight, every roleplaying encounter, and every trap and treasure matter. If it starts with a kidnapping, it had better end with mortal peril. If it starts with a plague, that disease had better be the fault of a villain or demon who can be confronted. Escalation is a critical element in gaming. If an adventure starts slowly (and it's okay if it does), it still needs to gather momentum over time. Even throwaway encounters should increase tension and emphasize the mood. To design for this means that you are looking at every character and encounter and trying to find a key element that is easy to communicate in the moment when the heroes encounter that element. Backstory is a waste of time for players in most fantasy adventures. Meeting non-player characters (NPCs) is good—if that meeting increases the level of tension in the scenario.

Saturation or Pulp Roots. Third and final, every single encounter should be in a super-saturated style. In photography and art generally, saturation refers to the depth or vividness of hues or pigments. They can be thin and watercolor, or they can be thick, saturated pigments like oil paintings. As a game designer, screw subtlety. It looks great on paper, but most of the time, it fails to translate across the medium of a DM to players. What you want is a richness of experience. The green knight shouldn't just be green; he should be wearing leafy armor, and his helmet crowned with oak leaves, and his eyes turn to acorns. The demon lord shouldn't just have horns and fire and claws; he should have horns of black poisonous smoke, with claws of adamantium, a whip of fire, and his entire body an embodiment of coals and wrath.

This isn't just a matter of description, though saturation in art usually is about the surface. For super-saturated, the depth of character, plot, and location should also be dialed up. Villains can twist moustaches, sure, but what you really want is a villain who rages against the world for a reason, not just because he's evil. He hates the order of paladins. Evil should be specific, not generic. Locations should be filled with devices for stunts and action, not with bland furniture and clichés. Nobody goes adventuring to be bored.

Yes, super-saturated design taken too far is over-the-top pulp stupidity. But the risks are greater if you fail to provide enough meaty adventure than if you provide too much. Consider for a moment the classic adventure **DWELLERS IN THE FORBIDDEN CITY**: It invented the yuan-ti, the aboleth, and the tasloi, plus gave us a whole lost city in a volcano's caldera. Over the top? Not really. The monsters are so rich and classic that they have survived four editions of **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** (well, not the tasloi), and the setting is one that works time after time. The approach of pulp fiction is that everything should stand out, that subtlety is wasted, and that excitement is preferred over introspection. Games are a vibrant, participatory medium that demands action and color; don't waste your time trying to make them into something else.

Conclusion

To understand games, you must study and master both the flavor and mechanical pillars of RPGs or your chosen specialty. You must pitch big ideas rather than incremental updates, because the incremental projects will keep your name out there, but will never gain you a reputation for big thinking. And of course, you must be prepared with a treasure chest full of design ideas for the day when a big opportunity presents itself.

The basics of game design are a variety of related areas of expertise, all used to create new rules, envision new play environments, and to generate entirely new modes of play in new gaming genres.

Within the RPG field, make sure your design supports concise rules and description, a planned escalation of tension, and a flavorful, saturated environment that compels players to engage with the setting and foes.

2

Designing RPGs: Computer and Tabletop

Colin McComb

By now, we're all familiar with the gamut of computer-based role-playing games (CRPGs) even if we haven't played them all: the **ULTIMA** series, the **FALLOUT** series, **MORROWWIND**, the various Infinity Engine games, MMOs like **WORLD OF WARCRAFT** and **EVERQUEST**, and many, many more. As the market for CRPGs swells and more designers leave or consider leaving the tabletop market for the computer game market, it's worth considering the differences involved in designing the two media, what works, what doesn't, and what could be improved.

The primary reference manual for the design of a computer game is called the design document. The design doc outlines your system's rules, your game's mechanics, lists and descriptions of places, creatures, and people. It also contains art requests, sound descriptions, and guides for game music to help the composer set the mood. Each and every feature of each and every area requires specific and detailed information in order to create a playable game and an immersive atmosphere for the players. Unlike tabletop rulebooks, it is constantly changing and evolving as the game development progresses. It will not be final until "feature lock," the point at which the game's producer decides that nothing else will be added to the game, and all resources come to bear on testing the soon-to-be-final product.

For tabletop designers, the best way to imagine this is that you are building all the components of an RPG at once: rulebook, player's guide, creature guides, and the campaign setting, combined in a single document. The design document can frequently run into many hundreds of pages, especially for a game of any length or heft.

It might appear that there is a vast difference in the design between the two media. In certain senses, this is even true. However, in my experience, this difference can be summed up in two areas. The first is detail; the second is human intelligence and intuition.

First Answer: Detail

"You enter a 10-foot x 10-foot room here. There is an orc here. It is guarding a treasure chest."

That's pretty simple, right? In a tabletop game, sure. But if you try to give this description to an artist and a programmer, they'll come back at you with a binder full of questions. For example, the artist will ask:

- What's the context? Is this in a dungeon, a house, a tower?
- What does the entrance to the room look like? Is it an archway, a gate, a curtain, or a door? If it's a curtain or door, what material is it made of?
- What does the room look like? Is it made of wood, stone, or metal, or something else? What's in the room?
- What does the orc look like? What is it wearing, how tall is it, how muscular? What weapons is it carrying, and what armor is it wearing?
- How does the orc attack? Are its movements fluid and sweeping or broad, hacking attacks? If the artist has to animate attacks and movement, this information is required up front.
- What does the treasure chest look like?

You'll need to tell the programmer essential details as well. This assumes that you've already defined the game style (first-person shooter, over-the-shoulder, third-person isometric RPG), and that you have previously established your basic game systems and monster stats in the design document. The programmer will want to know:

- Are there any constraints on the player's actions in the room? What are the clipping paths for the character—that is, where can the character move?
- What artificial intelligence (AI) set should the orc use: hostile, helpful, neutral?

- Are there any variations in the orc's routines? Does it have dialogues attached to it? Are there any action cues for the orc's behavior? Does the orc move around the room in a pre-scripted or random sequence?
- Can the treasure chest be opened? How? Does it require a key? If there's a lock, can it be picked? What sort of container is it? What does it contain: Should the program consult a random table or is there a specific set of items inside?

You get the idea—and this isn't even all that they'll want to know. A computer game designer must imagine the details a game master (GM) can invent on the fly without the benefit of a targeted group of players and under the supervision of the rest of the development team. This puts the designer at an immediate disadvantage.

The designer's job is to get out of the way of the game—but first: to create the story; populate that story with friends, enemies, and other assorted creatures; assign treasures, quests, and keys; build the puzzles; and generate an internally coherent game system. In short, it's similar to tabletop design, but it's much more intricate and involved. There's a reason we see huge designer teams on larger AAA computer/console titles: We have story and character designers, level designers, item/shop/placement designers, mechanics/system designers, each of them focusing on a very specific part of the game play. While they may step in to help other design teams, most have a specific core competency, and they own that part of the game.

What sort of benefit do we see from this attention to detail?

- We remove the necessity for a human game master, allowing players to play games alone if necessary.
- We can run complex equations more quickly. No longer do we need to rely on a single die roll; we can build intricate character/attack/defense systems that combine a variety of traits and skills to create a more realistic experience.
- We can run combats that might take all night in a tabletop game in a matter of moments, and create immediately comprehensible tactical situations.

On the other hand, we do see some serious drawbacks, and we as players have largely conditioned ourselves to ignore them or play around them. What are these behaviors, and what can we as designers do to improve them?

AI is only as smart as its inputs. The antagonists, though carefully and lovingly scripted, cannot act beyond the bounds of that scripted behavior. They cannot change their tactics to react to a surprising use of a spell or item by a player and, in first-person shooters, will frequently not react at all. The game may not even allow such deviation. Even if you want to do it, you just don't have the option. In real life, you can use a screwdriver, for example, to turn a screw, to defend yourself, as a drumstick, or to reverse it and use it as a hammer, though

these latter three uses are not recommended. In a computer game, you generally have only one use for a tool: its designed use.

Computer games require chokepoints and a way to create the illusion of free will. If the players of a computer game decide to ignore the primary portion of the adventure, they'll soon find themselves with nothing to do. Further, they usually must gather keys, items, or complete puzzles in order to unlock other areas of, for instance, a town. Locking these areas makes a difference for character advancement, for tutorials to teach the player how to navigate the game system, and for game balance—not to mention the necessity of loading massive areas into the computer's memory—but they are strictures that make little actual sense in terms of the game world.

Second Answer: Human Intelligence and Intuition

"You enter a 10' x 10' room. There is an orc here. It is guarding a treasure chest."

Sometimes it really is that simple. Do the players need to know the texture of the wall? Do they need to understand the light source in the room? What if they want to know why the orc is guarding the chest? If they do, the GM will be more than happy to make it up for them. The great advantage to tabletop gaming is that the depth of the answers to the questions depends on the imagination of the game master. You might call this "distributed design:" rather than spending precious words outlining every possible scenario, the designer can lay out a basic framework and trust in the game master to fill in the blanks in the manner that best fits each individual campaign.

This allows the designer to write more, to fill the pages with broader information and extend the reach of the adventure. Freeing up these pages opens the possibilities for serious and far-reaching epics, with potential detours across the whole of the campaign world. The tabletop designer's job is to ensure that the adventure adheres to the rules laid out in the system, to create an entertaining story, and to provide the tools necessary for the game master to run the game.

Yet our adventures still require us to create the illusion of choice for the players. If we want the game master to use our adventure, we need to outline plot hooks, story devices, and even mechanical inducements to lure the players into this web. If these fail, then at some point the game master may simply have to tell his players that the direction they want to go destroys the adventure he has prepared.

What benefits accrue from tabletop gaming? It provides a broader, more potentially interactive experience. Instead of being forced into a single storyline, the players can scrap the idea of the adventure altogether and strike out in a new direction. The game master may choose to integrate portions of the published adventure as necessary, but the players have far more choice in the fate of their characters. They can help create the direction of the story.

Tabletop RPGs offer better social aspects. Though online gamers can use headsets and communicate directly via voice over IP (VOiP) technology, the interaction is not the same. Computer games tend to require a sense of forward motion, a feeling that the players are making headway toward resolving their quest. In person, gamers are allowed to relax, to make jokes, to react to each other's physical presence and share the joy of the hobby.

The game doesn't end at a predetermined point, and the end of an adventure flows easily into next week's session. The players don't need to wait 12-18 months for a sequel, if one ever arrives at all.

Lastly, smaller audiences mean more material. It's no secret that the computer game market dwarfs the tabletop market. Ironically, this frees up creators in tabletop gaming to try new ideas, test new mechanics, and imagine countless worlds—the bottom line is smaller, so the reach can be greater. By contrast, computer games now routinely cost \$10-25 million per title. With this much money involved, most developers can't even touch the envelope, let alone push it.

The drawbacks to tabletop games are visible and glaring. They require a group of friends and a scheduled time; it's rare and difficult to have a pickup tabletop RPG session, but a computer game is ready any time the player is.

The systems in most tabletop games are by necessity less powerful and less involved. Math, plotting, movement, scoring, and other essential record-keeping can bog down a game in no time if we designers aren't careful—we need to keep the rules comparatively light and the systems comparatively anemic if we're to allow our players to make any progress at all.

We have to rely on words to paint our pictures, while computer developers have teams of hugely talented artists to launch their ideas into full-colored glory.

We have less reach and influence in the broad market. A tabletop game that sells 100,000 copies is a breakout success, while the same number at a computer development house might result in layoffs or the closure of the studio.

As computers become more powerful, we will likely see a growing ability in games to react to personal play styles and offer more open-ended adventures. The MMO world has already begun to replicate the social aspects of games, and while they cannot yet replace the actual physical presence of your friends, chances are good that someone's working on that. Does this mean that tabletop designers should try to emulate computer-based designs to lure that market back to tabletop? Or should we make a more permanent move into the computer game industry?

Ultimately, this is a decision that each designer will have to make for him- or herself, but regardless of which segment of the industry we choose, we should focus on delivering the single best positive gaming experience for our customers, to the best of our abilities.

3

The Process of Creative Thought

Wolfgang Baur

Creativity is at the heart of good design, but it's an overused and sometimes over-mystified word. The work of creativity is different than analytical or physical work, but it's still a process that can be mastered. Here's one take on it, based on my own experience and that of a rather different mind.

This essay is a summary and interpretation of David Kord Murray's **BORROWING BRILLIANCE** (Gotham Books, New York, 2009), which tries to systematize and demystify creative thought for the engineering and technical professions. In particular, Murray believes that creative thought can be taught and that you can become better at it with practice. I think almost any writer or game designer would agree; the proof is simply that creative work improves in quality over time. This is why, for instance, first novels are held to a lower standard than later work.

Here's my take on what Murray's approach means for game design, and especially adventure design. It's fairly densely packed, but I think there's a process and an insight into creativity here that's worth further unpacking and discussion.

Origin of a Creative Idea

Creativity never happens in a vacuum. Everyone builds on what came before, and how you approach the work can make a huge difference in how good the final result is. For instance, some designers believe that creativity is paramount, and pursue the True Weird as their goal. Others find value in expanding the work of prior designers through canonical worldbuilding. These are two wildly different approaches. Both are generating creative work of different types.

Here are the three stages that represent the origin of creative ideas.

1. Defining the problem.

The first step is understanding what it is that you need to solve. For engineers and programmers, this is usually relatively straightforward: Identify the problem space, research it, understand it, and describe it. For game design and other less engineered pursuits, this stage is the creative brief. That is, what are you being asked to deliver, what audience will you address, what is the project outline, and what are the design goals?

In either case, you need to define a vision of what you're after. This can be a commercial proposition as well as a creative one. For instance, you might be looking to address entry-level players with a high-action, low-roleplay set of basic mechanics, or you might be trying to engage an experienced audience with a story-rich capstone adventure that builds on prior work.

“The core element of successful creative work requires reframing your point of view to approach the original problem in a new way.”

Know what are you after creatively and commercially, and define it for yourself at the start. Why? Because how you define the problem determines how you will solve it. Knowing the problem is knowing the foundation of your creative process.

2. Borrowing ideas.

If you think you operate in isolation from other designers, gamers, and the culture at large, you're mistaken. And worse, if you don't look at similar problems and systems, you are undercutting your chances of a successful design. You can get creative raw materials this way because, for all creative work, your materials are ideas. This isn't to say you swipe text and settings and so forth. Build up a library of resources that are both close and distant, and learn the options you have.

When you look to use ideas you find useful, it's best to borrow from distant sources; generally speaking, if you are writing a **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** adventure, then swiping from other D&D adventures makes you a thief, whereas borrowing an element from board games or MMOs makes you smart. Borrowing from much more distant sources like theatre or history makes you a creative

genius. Research the field, and then go far beyond that. I'd like to say that Open Design does this better than anyone else; the well of inspiration that patrons bring to a project is global, comes from all levels of experience, and is simply much broader than any single designer—even one at the top of his game at Wizards of the Coast—can hope to match.

It's worth mentioning here that creative work in this style goes back to an older formulation of creativity. That is, I believe true creative work is not about the artist or the designer; that's a modern aberration based on copyright maximalism and the notion of the auteur or the lone genius. To me, working with shared worlds and collaborative designs, this equation of creativity with an individual is largely nonsense. Individuals are products of their times and their culture and, most of all, are heavily influenced by their peers.

I take an attitude a little closer to the sciences. That is, creative work is about the work, which must copy and improve on what has gone before. Rules sets are a foundation. We build on them. Settings and shared universes are a culture that designers work within and build to improve. The creation of a better gaming experience is the goal, not the creation of artistic reputation.

Finally, it's worth saying that it's best not to fall in love with an idea or concept but to view the options fairly dispassionately. This is not to say that you shouldn't be passionate, but that there's a stage where you have to set that passion aside. If you are blindly in love with a particular idea or concept then you've stopped being creative with it, and it becomes locked in place. In my view, you need a certain critical disdain or at least objectivity toward ideas, an ability to abandon them.

3. Combining and connecting the borrowed ideas.

The real magic of creative work, to me, comes in the unexpected combination of the many notes, ideas, concepts, and materials you gathered in stage two. This is where you combine Hollywood-style narrative arcs with tax software (as Intuit did). Or you combine the insights of poker with economics (as Professor Nash did). Combine geology with biology and Malthus (as Darwin did). Or combine political science and network analysis (as Christakis and Farrow did). In each case, two different worlds at the start are indeed a single element of thought by the end.

In the case of game design, finding such synergies might mean combining genre elements with non-genre elements, combining classical rhetoric with social skill challenges, or combining ancient saga plotlines with science fantasy elements. In each case, the core element of successful creative work requires reframing your point of view to approach the original problem in a new way: Reverse your encounter, change subgenre, combine history with pulp, etc. Brainstorm and jam pieces together to make them fit a narrative or to apply a matrix or triggers to a sandbox. For me, this usually means taking all the notes from stage two and puzzling how they fit together.

Evolution of a Creative Idea

While creativity requires posing a problem, gathering ideas, and putting those ideas in unusual juxtapositions, it also requires time to ferment and time for your own take on the material to gestate. To me, the raw materials often seem like insoluble lumps at first—until suddenly they don't. Suddenly they seem like pieces of a whole. That requires incubation, judgment, and iteration of your creative approach—the next three steps.

4. Incubation.

Puzzling with the elements doesn't always get you very far. Take some time to allow combinations to settle into a solution. The first three elements of creative thought are about the inputs to your subconscious, but it's foolish to try to force everything to snap together in a massive rush. It might happen, certainly, but often it won't.

You might think of this as a creative block, but pushing the design process too quickly leads to errors that later need to be torn out. I find it more valuable to pause in your design process, to sleep on it, and sometimes to put it aside for weeks. The extreme case of this is Isaac Newton, who waited 15 years between the time he framed the problem before he came back to the calculus. But that's the pace of subconscious thought. I find that the best solutions are the ideas that spring to mind when I'm half-sleeping, or are the result of the classic shower inspiration—which is odd when you consider it. Why is creative thought advanced when you are focused on the mundane?

“If something about a design bothers you, figure out why.”

It's an element of the psychology of creativity; this is how your subconscious brings up possible ideas and solutions. In the early stages you are jamming ideas and possible solutions into your mind. The output from the subconscious requires you to turn off the stream of conscious thought and let other thoughts through—daydreaming thoughts. Sometimes that process is the flash of an instant, and sometimes that process is very long. It can, however, be helped, in an unusual way.

You can create opportunities for creative output by turning off your hurry and work and activity. Talk a long walk and give it a think. Get rid of TV, radio, your favorite MMO, or anything that requires conscious thought. Ideal activities are the ones that rely on muscle memory or at least no conscious effort, such as biking, knitting, meditation, or driving. It only looks like laziness; in fact, you'll find some of your biggest breakthroughs happen this way. It sounds a bit woo-woo and New Agey, but I swear to you that time spent away from hammering the keyboard can be time very well spent.

5. *Judging The Work.*

Having a flash of insight is terrific (and it feels so good!), but it's not nearly enough. You need to get really critical of the results of that insight, and hold it up to comparison and discrimination against alternative solutions. That is, your stage of creative judgment should identify both the strengths and weaknesses of a solution. Brainstorms are a start in the earlier stages of combining, but you need to winnow out the best elements and discriminate between the viable and the foolish. Have a Steve-Jobs-level mania for what's strong and what's weak. If something about a design bothers you, figure out why.

Strong opinion and ego in design play in here; you will disagree with others, and that's normal. To win those disagreements, you need to identify not just that a given element is good, but why. How does it play into the whole? How does it solve a design problem? How does it improve the play experience? Or worse, how does it destroy the play experience? The creative process isn't about accept/reject based on your opinion. It's a debate.

I'd say that the Open Design discussions suss out weakness and find sources of design strength better than current publishing methods that rely on a small group of designer, developer, and editor, or even small teams of designers, writers, and quality assurance. The weight of many minds focused on results—or even just the knowledge of impending peer review—makes for sharper design because it finds more of the weaknesses and addresses them from many angles.

6. *Enhancing.*

The last stage is enhancing and iterating on the design solution you have. At this point, you eliminate the weak spots and enhance the strong through development and editing, ideally based on playtest results from the judging stage. Remember that creative thinking is about risk-taking; doing the same stuff will look the same as everything before.

“Every person comes up with ideas differently and works with them differently.”

A creative work will look a little odd; don't sand down all those corners, but find ways to enhance them and make sure that the novelty is still accessible to gamers who haven't seen it before. Your goal is recombining, re-borrowing, re-structuring. Iterate until the final is a seamless whole.

For designers, this approach offers several advantages. It means you can talk about creative design in stages, and you can be self-aware enough to realize you haven't even figured out what problem you are solving, or you are circling around and around in the research/borrowing stage without ever moving on to combination and incubation. It means that in collaboration you separate out stages; you can narrow the focus to a discussion of the central problem or a

discussion of what approaches to borrow, or you can brainstorm to combine and resort ideas. They are all separate things.

Likewise, particular parts of the process can be judgment meetings where the results of brainstorm and incubation are explicitly weighed and kept or discarded. Same with playtest discussions and sharpening the design. By then, it's clear that it is too late to introduce new raw materials for recombining unless you want to iterate the whole design process again (which you might).

Making the Creative Process Work for You

Every person comes up with ideas differently and works with them differently, but these stages of creativity are fundamental. For my own part, I've found it useful to consider these stages with my most recent project, **COURTS OF THE SHADOW FEY**. It's a way to time your progress. ("Have I hit the problem statement cleanly? Maybe it's time to start borrowing ideas.") In the borrowing ideas phase this time out, I busily stacked up elements from **FIRST EDITION AD&D**, from demons and fey in mythology, from 17th century rhetoric, from operatic history, and even from theatrical staging/scene trickery—I cast a broader net than usual, and found my own creativity pumped up as a result when I moved into recombining, outlining, and juxtaposing elements. And though I've been through the muddle in the middle many times, it never hurts to know that it's a normal stage of creative work. At this writing, I'm in the enhancing stage, drawing connections out between previously unrelated encounters to maximize shock value, to draw out the themes of the adventure—and just to make the whole as epic as it can possibly be.

I've found it helpful to consider my roadmap to the creative mind, some of it obvious, other bits less so. What's important about it is that identifying the stages helps you make a realistic schedule for your design work, helps you focus on what design problems or resources are most helpful at the beginning, middle, and end, and helps you consider what stages of the project you might want to spend extra time on to get the results you want. Writers and designers can spend hours talking about their process (instead of applying seat of pants to seat of chair and writing!), and I've done my share of procrastinating.

Now I have a better name for that—incubation—and I have a better sense of when it might be most useful: after borrowing ideas, before judging the work and enhancing it. I'm certainly glad of the results I've seen in my own work, and I hope that by ordering your own work into a sequence like that, you'll find your design work is faster, more organized, and more powerfully original.

4

Creative Mania & Design Despair

Wolfgang Baur

Most of the time, design is about rather concrete elements of mathematics, level geometry, narrative arcs, area descriptions, and player character rewards. In this essay I'm addressing a part of the work that's a bit squishier than usual, but I think it's an important topic. Namely, how does a designer deal with the ups and downs of working on a manuscript for an extended period, especially when the work doesn't go well?

The First Phases of Design

Perhaps it's different for other designers, but I know my own pattern really well. The initial idea for a project gets me all charged up and on fire—that's a time of pure mania. I want to work on the manuscript all the time, one idea seems to lead naturally to another, and progress is easy.

This is partly because there are no hard choices to make yet, and partly because everything is fresh. Every designer loves new terrain; relatively few grognards survive long as professional designers, because . . . Well, grognards are filled with a shining love for what has already been, for revisiting the old terrain, and for the rosy glow of the past. I'm fond of past designs, the games of my youth, and

certainly for the highlights of the field by other designers. But the job of design is about creating new game-play experiences, new settings, new rules and character archetypes, and new spins on old ideas, as discussed in the *What is Design?* essay (page 1). As a designer, you need to understand the past so you can build on top of it. Give me something new to play with, and I'll be delighted.

My advice to all designers is to ride that early high as long and as hard as possible. Work late, get up earlier, burn lunch hours, unplug your cable, and stop wasting time on Xbox and Facebook. Seriously, this is a window of opportunity when you are itchy to create wonderful new things. Do that. You'll lose that honeymoon glow soon enough, trust me, so take advantage of the enthusiasm that makes it easy to get ahead, to build outlines and crunch numbers, and makes the work seem effortless. Wasting this period while waiting for a response from an editor, from a patron poll, or from anyone, really, is just a waste. You won't recapture the sense of lightning in a bottle later in the project, no matter how cool the twists and modifications make it.

The second phase is what I call the grind—the period when contradictions start to show up in the adventure flow, or the math of the new subsystem falls apart during playtesting. Novelists call this the “muddle in the middle,” and it is the part of creating a text or system that just sucks. You have gone past the section that was pure fun, you've done all the bits that bring you joy, and now it's at the level of craft, iteration, refinement, and expansion of all the cool, sexy ideas of the first stage.

At this point, odd as it may sound, you realize that you have a relationship with the manuscript, and sometimes that relationship is going to be difficult. You're going to have to make trade-offs. It's a bit like dating: new love is wonderful, but at some point you either get serious or you drift apart. Getting serious means limiting other dating opportunities; making design choices restricts future options. Your manuscript is an extension of your creativity, and that means it demands attention, honesty, and devotion. You might say it's a one-sided sort of relationship: What does it give back, after all? That's missing the next step, though—the turn-over to development and editing. And that's where my overextended metaphor breaks down.

Beyond Ideas to the Work

In any case, once the design gets balky the hard choices phase is upon you. This is where the best designers earn their reputations. Some designers never get this: It's not enough to have great ideas, you also need to have great execution, refining those ideas into something more than “wouldn't it be cool if?” brainstorming.

That isn't to denigrate brainstorming. It's just that this stage culls the dilettantes and amateurs out of the herd, because the work required here is hard. It's drudgery. If you are in this stage, you're earning your keep and, emotionally, the

manuscript seems less a source of joy and more a source of (perfectly natural) loathing. You are writing material that you don't love but that the design needs to function.

The goal in this phase is to maintain enough love for the project that you can keep up momentum until the end is in sight. Maybe you save some juicy sections to write at the very end. Maybe you have a character you reintroduce late in an adventure, or a particularly sharp set of dragon stats and templates that you set aside to reward yourself with when you see the end approaching. Different writers use different tricks.

The problem here is that the joy of phase one has met reality—and for writing and design, reality is sitting at a keyboard trying to pour your brain onto the page in a way that will reach your audience.

Why is this hard? Two reasons: 1) A premise is always easier to create than all the manifold logical consequences of that premise, and 2) you need to think through the impact of your design decisions on your audience. For most designers, that means evaluating the worth of playtest reports, first readers, editors, or developers. For collaborative design approaches like Open Design projects, it means having even more people offering their opinions and critiques before a project is gelled, outlined, or written. (I'll talk more about the challenges of collaboration in another essay.)

You need to have a strong enough sense of the design goal to ignore the junk or snark, a strong enough design sense to maintain cohesion in the mechanics and logic of the game, and a strong enough set of writing chops to convey both the flavor and the mechanics in a pleasing and accessible way.

New Demands

You must respond to new demands from the clay of the design itself. The project fits into some molds that you could foresee and some that you couldn't. Because your understanding of the game design deepens over the course of the work, at one point or another you must abandon some of the things you love about the project. In Open Design, this happens sooner and meets the needs of the audience better because criticism starts immediately, like it or not. I think that makes Open Design projects a bit of a shock to designers used to working in isolation, but also makes it perfectly natural to younger designers who collaborate as a matter of course. That is, reaction to massive feedback super-early is partly generational. But this transition to abandoning some elements of a game design happens in all forms of design, not just RPGs.

For instance, I started **THE HALLS OF THE MOUNTAIN KING** with the sense that it would be a very traditional dwarven delving with big monsters and combat sections; the brief I used to pitch it to patrons was “a new Moria.” But the

brainstorm for the project made it clear that the theme of greed (which I pitched as a secondary theme) was popular enough to become the main theme. The idea of a traditional set of monsters fell away when the number of factions grew to include factions within the dwarves, a cult, and some derro. The adventure became event-driven pretty quickly. I had to throw away some of the original assumptions. The feedback on the pitches made us throw away even more.

In the end, we had a much stronger idea of what **HALLS** was about, but it was also a less traditional dwarven adventure. That's good; there's no point in rehashing old approaches and stale, "beginner" material for an advanced audience like Open Design patrons. The resulting premise means that the enemies were still deadly and combat was still a primary factor, but my understanding of what the audience wanted changed. And the dream of a Moria-style adventure had to be abandoned pretty quickly to accommodate other cool ideas, like a Masonic-style secret brotherhood, a corrupt gold dragon, and cursed gold that served Mammon's ends.

Closing It Down With Ease or Rage

Finally, if you are persistent and don't let anything stop you, the muddle in the middle does come to an end. The end phase of a project is either a time of hope or rage for me. When I leave a manuscript hopeful, I've had plenty of time with it, I feel all the elements are in place, and I think it really is ready for another set of hands. I may be a bit wistful, tinkering with strands of it but, frankly, I've grown a little tired of having the manuscript around. Sometimes this convinces me to make a turnover early, because I'm just done with it. These are the times it is easier to close out a project. Things float gently to a conclusion. The deadline seems generous. All is well with the project.

That happens less often than I'd like, but it does happen.

More often, the end stage is more about rage. I wish I had more time! The project deserves another month, at least! Yes, usually the deadline is killing me, and I'm fighting very hard to keep everything together, to fill in all the "XX" place markers and all the "TBD" or "NAME HERE" stopgaps that I used earlier as shortcuts. Sometimes it's not the deadline but the word count. There's either too much or too little space to do what I want to do. And so I slash and burn sections away to make room for something vital, or I fill out a section that I know the editor will want more of. It's a stage of everything coming home to roost, which is especially the case for really large designs (say, over 40,000 words or so, and certainly anything over 60,000).

It's impossible for me to keep everything in my head for a 60,000-word manuscript (this is why I love outlines), so at the end there's some shuffling and struggle to get it all together in a form I like, much less one I love. This is when I recall that someone said that manuscripts aren't finished but abandoned. Large

projects are harder to bring to the stage where everything interlocks smoothly with everything else. And very large projects always involve a certain amount of frustration because it is so very hard to achieve the level of quality I want through an entire design beyond a certain size. That upper limit has grown for me over the years (20,000 words used to intimidate me, but no longer), but there's still a realistic limit as to how big a design can be before it becomes utterly unwieldy.

I suspect that the sheer difficulty of marshalling all elements is what delays all larger creative works. They're not just a linear string of text; if the work is any good at all, it has emergent properties, resonances, themes, and layers. In other words, the design has become a set of interconnected systems, references, and dependencies.

Turnover and Acceptance

The end stage is letting go, committing to saying, "Here's the manuscript. I've worked hard and given it everything I know. Someone else needs to carry it the rest of the way to publication." It's a tough stage for some writers because you're turning over something like a child to others. You hope they love it as much as you do, though inevitably you know in your heart of hearts that you have given more of yourself to it, more hours, more devotion, than others ever can or will. But you trust the editor, the graphic designers, the company you're working with. And so you let it go, because time has run out, because there's nothing more you can do, because you have grown to think there's nothing else you can give to make it better.

Oddly enough, turning over a manuscript to others always leaves me with a case of creative depression. My thoughts are generally morose or gloomy at this stage. I could have done it so much better! I had to compromise because of the word count! The rules in that section are way too complicated—I should have streamlined the bookkeeping somehow, or written a new subsystem. The playtesters/editor/DMs just don't understand the vision I was aiming for.

I am a pathetic Gloomy Gus. For about a week or two.

Then, some bright, new, shining, wonderful idea will catch my eye, or I'll go through my big notebook full of ideas. One of those ideas seems to be so full of promise, so glorious, that surely it will be the shining, perfect sourcebook/adventure/article that I have always wanted it to be. And the mania returns. . . .

5

Seize the Hook

Rob Heinsoo

This essay discusses principles I apply when I design new games. Since the focus of this volume is on roleplaying game design, most of my examples are from roleplaying games I love. I was the lead designer of the **FOURTH EDITION OF DUNGEONS & DRAGONS**, so the examples will often go into considerably more detail when they relate to fourth edition (**4E**). But in my experience, I've found that these principles apply well to most types of game design: card games, board games, miniatures games, roleplaying games, and even video and computer games if you're lucky enough to get in on early design.

I'm most concerned with the mechanics of game design. If the game you want to design is like most other games, it will have a theme, physical or digital components, and written rules. The game's mechanics will consist of a set of carefully defined gameplay actions, component interactions, and information structures outlined by your rules. You can approach each game mechanic on its own, as something to be tinkered with and improved, or approach a mechanic as it interacts with all the other mechanics, the theme, and the components.

I've broken the essay into three nuggets of advice that more-or-less apply to the beginning, middle, and end of the design process.

First, design a game you want to play but can't because no one else has designed it yet.

Second, don't be satisfied with your design until you've found the key mechanical hook that captures the game's theme, creating an experience that's something like the experience being portrayed by your game.

Third, understand and follow through on the full implications of your game's mechanical hook.

1. Design a game you want to play but can't because no one else has designed it yet.

Corporations design products around what they think will sell. So do some writers and some extremely talented game designers. That may be a savvy move, particularly when you're deservedly confident in your creative powers and your ability to overcome designer's block and the obstacles that surface within every design. If you're starting out, or if you are more strongly motivated by internal creative pressure than business sense, you may be better off paying attention to the moments when you think about a game you want to play but realize that the game does not exist.

That moment may come while you're playing a game you love, then realize that it would be a better game if it had a different setting, different victory conditions, or had been designed for several players instead of only two. This process of riffing on what's already good is what I call the "Rolling Stones approach" to innovation, after the manner in which Keith Richards and Mick Jagger used to write songs together. Richards would start by picking out a tune they knew and liked, then they changed the song until they came up with something that sent them on a new path.

The Rolling Stones approach can work but, for me, moments of innovation come more often when I'm thinking about a particular group of people I want to play a game with. I get a clear vision of the game we would have the most fun playing together. Then I realize that the game I'm picturing doesn't exist. It's a good feeling: Now I can design it!

This social framework for your design vision can be a valuable tool. Writers learn to consider their audience, to think about the people they are writing for as if they are reading their work aloud to that chosen audience. As a game designer, you may be a just a bit luckier than a writer, because nearly all games are already group efforts or social experiences. It's a bit easier to know exactly who you are creating your game for: you and some friends who enjoy playing games with you.

Phrasing your goal in this manner is more important than it may sound. Our subconscious minds and insecurities trick most of us into giving up on creative projects too easily. Unless you're entirely certain of your abilities, that fear of failure can get worse when you envision your new game as a published product. Unconscious comparisons between your developing work and the published games you already love may erode your enthusiasm for your work. You're less

likely to get derailed if your immediate goal is to create a specific game you'll be able to enjoy with your friends. You'll be able to figure out how your game can step out into public later. When you're starting, focus on capturing the joy you felt when you realized that the game you wanted to play with your friends was something you would have to design yourself.

2. Don't be satisfied with your design until you've found the key mechanical hook that captures the game's theme, creating an experience that's something like the experience being portrayed by your game.

Let's unpack this advice one piece at a time before analyzing some examples of mechanical hooks that worked.

The Key Mechanic

The key mechanic is the most important element of a game design, the piece that sets the game apart from other games. In the best-case scenario, this mechanical hook ties so directly into the game's theme that it helps evoke a thrill (or other emotion) related to the experience that the game is based on.

Different genres of games have varying amounts of access to this best-possible version of the mechanical hook. Some great board games, like chess, poker, and Reiner Kneizia's **INGENIOUS**, a color-tile playing game, aren't about anything other than their mechanics. But most of the best roleplaying games marry theme and the mechanical hook. The roleplaying experience lets players create a compelling story together. The shared experience becomes truly memorable when the mechanics perfectly reinforce the game's core story.

"Don't be satisfied," he says . . .

Here is the good news: Once you start really working at designing games, you're going to come up with playable material. Really. If you're reading **THE KOBOLD GUIDE TO GAME DESIGN**, you've probably got enough experience to come up with ideas that will hang together well enough for dice to roll and pieces to move.

The potentially harsher news is that it could be a lot harder to get your well-themed mechanical design to be actual fun to play. There are a fair number of published designs every year that are clever, elegant, funny, or beautiful. But when you're done appreciating their aesthetics or their touches of clever design, the problem is that they're not that much fun. Designers who self-publish are probably most vulnerable to this problem, since the glow of getting a design to work can easily eclipse the fact that other people don't have as much fun playing the game as the designer does.

The single most common mistake is the same mistake writers make: getting fixated on an early idea or draft that seems to work so that you don't look for possibilities that might be better. It's not easy to stay open to the possibility that a good, early idea is in truth holding you back. But that's not the only angle you've got to cover. There's also the chance that ideas you're pretty sure are bad are somehow concealing worthwhile alternatives, somewhere behind their ugly surface.

As part of my creative process, I try to change my perspective about ideas I'm pleased with. I imagine that I'm tapping into a view from somewhere else in the multiverse. "Imagine I live in a world where this idea isn't the best possible solution. What other solution could there be?" Or "Imagine that this stupid piece of the game is somehow a good idea. If that were true, what would the consequences be? What would have to be true to make this a good idea?" When the trick works, new ideas that were eclipsed by earlier notions come out of hiding. The husk of the old idea falls behind.

Match the Mechanics to the Experience and Vice Versa

Despite your best efforts, there's always a chance that the moment-to-moment fixes you discover through playtesting lead your key mechanic away from the original vision or theme of the game. This may not be a bad thing. If you're serious about doing excellent game design rather than about designing the perfect incarnation of one specific world or theme, it's possible that your newly mutated key mechanic is worth saving and that your original vision needs to change.

To use a blunt example, if your game about arena fighting ends up feeling bloodless and hyper-rational, you might have created a mechanic that suits battles between well-programmed AIs and their serially inhabited robotic armor.

I experienced this situation when I was working on the dice-and-cards system that became **INN-FIGHTING**. I was originally designing a gambling game that would be played in taverns alongside **THREE-DRAGON ANTE**. But that stopped making sense. The mechanic started working when I realized it wasn't just that the game was played in taverns, the game was also about people fighting in taverns. Much better.

Key Mechanics that Work: Setting the Characters' Limits

CALL OF CTHULHU (CoC) is not my favorite game. I may be the only former Chaosium employee to say that I'm no fan of H.P. Lovecraft. But when I think of game mechanics that hook the players into the precise mindset of the characters they're portraying, I think of **CoC's** Sanity check mechanics. Sanity starts high for most **CoC** characters. Like the people in Lovecraft's books, player characters (PCs) start knowing little of the world's true masters. But as characters encounter

traces of the supernatural and creatures from the Mythos, their Sanity steadily degrades, even if their “successful” checks prevent them from going into catatonic shock or psychotic reactions.

For a real world analogy, you can compare CoC’s Sanity mechanics to a statistic I love hearing quoted about veteran mountain climbers. People speak as if the number of times a climber has summited Mount Everest without oxygen is a good thing. Let’s call it like it is: You don’t want to be on a climbing rope with a guy who has gone to the Top of the World and sucked vacuum three times too many. Likewise, the longer a CoC character manages to dodge the shoggoths, the more certain they are to break down and take everyone along with them. These aren’t the kind of hit points that come back.

So what can CoC’s sanity mechanic tell you about your own designs? First, it highlights the possibility that the themes of some games are best captured by limitations on the heroes. Most fantasy/adventure games focus on empowerment, but if the theme of your game is horror or final despair, it’s possible that enfeeblement mechanics may be called for instead. The trick is making sure that the game remains fun to play.

The current flotilla of indie RPGs frequently dances along this tightrope. Some of its games nail desperate emotional states with grinding-you-down mechanics. They’re not exactly the type of game you want to play often and that’s usually deliberate. Personally, I prefer the indie game **AGON: COMPETITIVE ROLEPLAYING IN ANCIENT GREECE** by John Harper. I mention AGON because it contains a subtle version of character limitation even though it’s about high-powered Greek heroes who slalom through the monsters and myths of the ancient world.

I didn’t understand AGON when I first read the rules. I noticed that as heroes took wounds in a given combat, they got weaker and weaker, becoming less likely to be able to dig themselves out of that fight, a death-spiral effect that many games blunder into. What I didn’t pick up on right away is that there is a survival mechanism: A PC can climb out of mechanically hopeless situations by swearing oaths to the other characters and the gods. In other words, a Greek hero who wants to survive and conquer all enemies becomes more and more obligated to other characters and competing mythological entities. Heroes don’t take permanent wounds; they take permanent obligations. It’s a mechanical hook that shows that heroes’ careers will be complicated by demands they could not have foreseen, demands that may place them at the mercy of one or all of their comrades. As a roleplaying incentive it captures the complicated lives of the Greek heroes wonderfully. And it’s more fun than going insane.

Key Mechanics that Work: Shaping the Game's Reality

Let's look at a more conventional roleplaying game experience, a game that was mostly (but as we'll see, not entirely) about empowerment. Steve Perrin's **RUNEQUEST** is the game that started the **BASIC ROLEPLAYING** system that gave birth to **CALL OF CTHULHU**. **RUNEQUEST** (RQ) was a streamlined system that had at least three subtle but effective key mechanics that came together to portray Greg Stafford's world of Glorantha, a world permeated by the magic of ancient and eternal gods.

RUNEQUEST started with the assumption that every player character was capable of magic. In the late 1970s gaming industry, dominated by class-based systems in which most of the characters could only use swords and bows, **RQ**'s battle magic system allowed every character to use points of Power to cast buff spells, minor or better-than-minor attack spells, and (praise be!) healing spells. In Glorantha, an adventurer who didn't know any magic was a deliberately crippled roleplaying experiment.

As an adventurer grew into a Rune-level character worthy of initiation into the mysteries of the gods, they had to sacrifice points of Power to gain rune spells. Magic wasn't just a free gift—truly powerful magic demanded sacrifice. Compared to the ever-escalating power curves of games like **AD&D**, **RQ** demanded sacrifice and cosmic responsibility as you rose in power.

And lastly, **RQ** modified its skill-based system with a groundbreaking book named **CULTS OF PRAX** that detailed the myths, rituals, and beliefs of the worshippers of a dozen of Glorantha's hundreds of gods. Alone, the myths and rituals would have made the book a wonderful work of alternate anthropology, but each cult write-up included battle magic and rune magic that was only available to worshippers of the gods. Suddenly **RQ**'s skill-based system had something that functioned like other games' classes, but grounded in the game's deep cosmology. Nowadays it seems like standard stuff, but in the late '70s, Stafford's **CULTS OF PRAX** was the first RPG product to take this tack—it created the player-oriented splat-book that came to dominate the **VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE** line, the rest of the White Wolf menagerie, and countless other games including both **THIRD** and **FOURTH EDITION D&D**.

Roleplaying game splat books mix story and mechanical elements to give specific characters both powers that are fun to play and a heightened sense of their alternate selves. That sounds an awful lot like my goal of the perfect mechanical hook. In a sense, **RQ** opened any game that could support itself with supplementary material to the possibility that the mechanical hook could be repeatedly reinvented, a ritual act of publishing that shapes the industry and our game shelves.

3. Understand and follow-through on the full implications of your game's mechanical hook.

Sometimes a game's greatest strength is ultimately the reason it fails. A few good games might have been great games if they'd had the time and vision to grapple with the full consequences of their key mechanics. I'll discuss three opportunities that can become problems if you're not careful.

Roleplaying Games Have Two Types of Participants

Roleplaying games have two types of participants: players and DMs. If all your effort goes into making a key mechanic that helps players have a great time but screws up the game master's life, you're not likely to find many groups playing your game. Unlike many other games, RPGs may require you to balance key mechanics aimed at players and key mechanics aimed at DMs. Of course, mainstream games have usually focused on the player's experience. Few mainstream RPGs have done much to provide key mechanics for DMs. Indie RPGs have recognized that hole and introduced any number of games that transform the experience of both player and game master.

In this respect, **FOURTH EDITION D&D** acted more like an indie game. We wanted to create a game that offered new key mechanics for both the players and the DM; innovating for one while ignoring the other wasn't going to be enough.

THIRD EDITION D&D's key mechanics for players and DMs had set the table for us. **THIRD EDITION**'s most significant advance was to treat both the player characters and the DM's monsters with the same mechanical rules. In previous editions, only the player characters had Strength and Wisdom attributes. Monsters were ad hoc creations of the game's publisher, with very little advice for DMs who wanted to create their own monsters. "Wing it like we do" would have been accurate advice for previous editions.

THIRD EDITION D&D (3E) advanced the art by showing that PCs, NPCs, and monsters could all be handled with (roughly) the same system math. DMs could spend their rainy-day-away-from-the-table time by leveling up monsters and designing NPCs that were every bit as detailed as PCs. It was an excellent system, although a bit strange because the arbitrary hit dice and attack bonus assumptions of earlier editions hadn't been revised; they'd just had a rational system of transformations applied.

FOURTH EDITION D&D took another look at what **3E** had accomplished and decided that it was not necessary to treat PCs and monsters by exactly the same rules. After all, the PCs were the pillars at the center of the campaign, playing every week. New monsters showed up every encounter. If the PCs were doing their jobs right, few monsters lasted more than one encounter. So the work that DMs and the Wizards of the Coast's research and development (R&D) staff was

putting into getting monsters just right with the detailed math of **3E** was in many respects wasted work. There was a type of simulation occurring, a simulation that appealed to many, but the game wasn't necessarily benefiting, and DMs were either suffering or intimidated.

So **4E** took the attitude that the DM's role had to be easier. The amount of information the DM needed to memorize or have on hand had to be cut down. Monster stat blocks needed to be simplified so that the DM didn't have to sift between minutiae that hardly ever turned up and important game-play mechanics.

For DMs, the key mechanic of **4E D&D** might be summarized like so: Hit points and attack bonus progressions were no longer arbitrary, so encounters played somewhat predictably at all levels; and role-based monster design helped DMs create fun encounters and adventures much more quickly. I'm not going to get more detailed about the DM-package which, to an ever-increasing extent, is backed up by the electronic resources available on the *Dungeons & Dragons Insider* Web site.

So what, then, of **4E** players? They were offered a key mechanic that has turned out to be more controversial. I was tired of my **3E** experience, when my favorite high-level Fighter turned out to be only as effective as his careful selection of magic items. The spellcasters in the **3E** system called the shots and, although the game's storylines felt consistent, many campaigns stalled out about the time that the spellcasters' increasing power made the other classes irrelevant.

This could have been solved in many ways, including a radical rebalancing of spells' power levels. The solution James Wyatt, Andy Collins, and I were excited about was to give every PC an ongoing series of choices of interesting powers. Most every time you gain a level you select a new power or a feat. Every combat round you have an interesting choice of which power or powers to use. This was my nirvana of gritty combat options created by exciting, exceptions-based design.

In my case, the vision owed a good deal to **RQ** and to Robin Laws' **FENG SHUI**, another example of a game in which every player character could be counted on to fight using interesting powers. Add exceptions-based design tricks learned from **MAGIC: THE GATHERING**, **SHADOWFIST**, and other trading card games. Add some lessons from computer games on ensuring that every character has a role in the party, and you've got a fair picture of **4E**'s major non-**D&D** inspirations.

Do Your Resources Meet Your Key Mechanic's Ambitions?

We would never have set out with a design centering on **4E**'s key mechanics working for a company smaller than Wizards of the Coast. Exceptions-based designs take time and skill to design. Then, they take time to playtest and develop into balanced options. As a rule, most RPG companies can't afford true mechanical development. Most companies pay something for game design,

trust the designer to test the game as much as possible, then pay an editor to work things out as best they can while putting the final book together. **4E**'s key mechanics wouldn't have worked for a smaller company.

One of my favorite games-that-didn't-quite-work-out proves this point. Robin Laws' **RUNE** (no relation to **RUNEQUEST**) published in 2000 by Atlas Games, is a brilliant design stunt hinging around a key mechanic in which players take turns creating deadly adventures with an exceptions-based points system. Each player is a deadly Viking warrior, the type of savage bastard who becomes the stuff of legends if he doesn't become worm food first. The game's current game master isn't just trying to help the other players have fun; the game master tries to score points by doing as much damage to the PCs as possible.

This picture of unbridled competition, an unapologetic contest between the players and the DM, perfectly embodies the grim worldview of those chilly Northerners. Does the game get major points for a key mechanic that evokes the theme? Oh yes, hell yes! I love many styles of gaming. In one of them, I cherish buying powers with points and destroying my enemies. So I'm just the type of competitive player who grooved on the concept of an RPG that alternated pitting players against the rest of the group like Loki vs. the rest of the Asgardians.

But there was no way that the game could be developed so that all those point-based player and game master options actually make sense. **RUNE** was playtested, but playtesting isn't enough. I started marking up my copy of **RUNE** with arrows pointing up and down for things that I guessed needed cost revisions. Soon I just couldn't take it anymore: too many arrows up, a few arrows down—there was no way was I going to be able to introduce a game that was all about competitive play and point-buys when the point-buys were broken. So the exact type of player who was going to love **RUNE** because of its key mechanic couldn't deal with the game because there was no way to deliver on the key mechanic's promise.

If your mechanical hook sounds great but you can't pull it off, your game can only succeed as a work of game-literature. A few people may buy your game to have on their shelves because they think it sounds damn cool. But they'll be disappointed when play isn't as cool as the concept.

But if you're a roleplaying game designer, the ironically good news, specifically for you, is that you may not have to worry as much about questions of balance and development as other types of game designers. Most roleplaying games can afford to care less about balance than games like **RUNE** or **MAGIC: THE GATHERING** because most roleplaying games allow players to cooperate. When one player character exceeds all others in a cooperative game, the others tend to rely on that character. Then they come up with game-world reasons why that character or power is so much better than anyone else. Eventually, people write game world novels that assume the power imbalance is the natural order of that world, and so it goes, until someone comes along and rebalances or re-imagines

the magical order. Obviously this isn't ideal; you'd probably rather understand the implications of your mechanics rather than be surprised at the worlds that come out of them. But so long as your mechanics are fun, RPGs are a slightly more forgiving medium where balance is concerned.

Know When to Moderate

Even if your key mechanic is good, you may want to temper its impact on your game in cases where there are secondary play styles that could be allowed to co-exist with your primary player pattern. Perhaps this applies most to games that are revisions of earlier games. This may be on my mind because of my experience with **4E**, since I'm having trouble thinking of other game designs that have the same issue. Or maybe the principle is a lot easier to see in your own work than when you're assessing other people's designs.

Yes, I love the effect of the power choices offered to every **4E** player. As a key mechanic, it did exactly what we'd hoped for the game. But I regret that the original design didn't manage to implement a simpler class, or two, so that a few players could play a game that didn't require them to choose between lists of interesting powers. There are **D&D** players who don't care much about the full list of interesting powers that are available to them. Sometimes they're just into the roleplaying. They're definitely into joining their friends at the table, rolling some dice, cracking good jokes, and still making a positive contribution to the party's survival. A simpler class, or piece of a class, would give those players the ability to join the table and roll the d20 without caring about which power they were using.

Given that **D&D** is endlessly renewed by the publication of player-oriented splat-books, the smart money is on the likelihood that someone will address this gap in player-experience some day.

Know When to Cut

You're starting out as a designer. You've got a design career ahead of you. You don't have to pack all your good ideas into one design, or even into three designs. This matters even more when your key mechanic needs space to flex its wings and your other ideas hinder the key mechanic from taking flight. You may have to dial down aspects of your game that arguably could have been just as good as the focus material that supports the key mechanic.

Again, **D&D** offers an example that's ready to hand. Once upon a time, early in **4E** design, the powers PCs acquired from their character class were only part of the equation. Racial powers were supposed to match character class powers for impact on your character and the game world. Throw in more powers in the paragon path and advantages that characters gained through feats, and you had an overcrowded character sheet.

As we fleshed out the character class powers, we recognized that class was capable of handling all the heavy lifting. Class powers mattered and made sense as the principal way that players thought about their characters. Racial powers still worked, but it turned out that they could still have a big impact on the game if each PC had only a single exciting racial power.

Fair enough. But not all of us had accepted the biggest consequence of the move to interesting character powers. The major source of 3E character power that had to be severely pruned in 4E was magic items. We had some good ideas for how magic item powers might work: They worked too well! Yes, magic items are an important part of D&D, framing many adventurers' aspirations, allowing players to fine-tune their characters, and pumping up the sense of the world's fantastic history. But the character classes were already doing a great job of throwing around awesome magic. When every character has the choice of dozens of interesting powers, there isn't room for magic items' powers to compete with character class powers.

"Cutting good ideas doesn't dispel them forever."

I'd never been a fan of the way in which non-spellcasters in 3E could end up defined as composites of their magical items. And since I knew the choice was between compelling character powers and a full arsenal of magic item powers, I focused on making character class power compelling.

Cutting good ideas doesn't dispel them forever. If you keep track of your drafts and flag worthwhile ideas that have to be cut, you'll often be able to use the ideas in a later design. Cutting a good idea can pay off when it is competing with too many other good ideas. Give all the elements of your design the amount of attention they deserve and you'll have several designs to your name instead of one overstuffed curiosity.

A Strong Hook and Strong Follow-Through

Find a mechanical hook that thrills you. It may come to you in a bolt of inspiration. It may come to you after many false starts. Either way, keep searching until you find something that you suspect will set your game apart from all others.

Then follow through with the hard work that provides your hook with a full game to live in. Yes, even with the best mechanical hook, it's going to take a lot of work to finish a game. The good news is that if your hook really is good, it's likely to make your work easier, opening new approaches and ideas that keep you entertained. If you end up feeling like you're doing drudge work, you should ask yourself whether the work is necessary, or whether the audience will also be bored.

If the finished game ends up sitting on your shelf, scarcely played, you probably didn't succeed. If the game turns out to be something you and your friends play often, even with simply playtest components, you're either a skillful game designer or (much less likely!) a charismatic demagogue. Either way, you've got potential.

Every design will teach you new tricks. Like writers who return often to pivotal themes, successful game designers have a way envisioning new ways of using key mechanical hooks; what worked once can work again, if phrased in a way that the audience perceives as new.

The worst outcome is that you give up before you finish your game. You learn less this way.

The best possible outcome is that you will design a great game, then manage to launch it out into the wider world. If you enjoy that best possible outcome, guess what happens next? Pretty much the same thing that happens if your game design doesn't quite work out: You start your next design, taking what you've learned and doing your best.

If you're having fun, keep designing. The world continually surprises itself by its need for great new games. With a good hook and some hard work, you'll help.

6

Basic Combat Systems for Tabletop Games

Colin McComb

Nearly every game you'll play has a dispute resolution system. Dominoes uses a simple numerical comparison; Rock-Paper-Scissors has an elementary matrix; checkers and chess follow prescribed rules to determine who takes what piece and how. For role-playing games, chances are that you're looking for something with a little more heft.

Any time you create a system, you should keep your end goal in mind: What do you want your system to do? If you're looking for speed, a quick-and-dirty combat system is for you—but you'll have to accept that rules lawyers will find loopholes and exceptions. Naturally, you'll want to minimize those holes, but if you spend your time designing a system that closes off every workaround you can imagine, you've just removed "quick-and-dirty" from the equation, and are instead creating a real combat simulator—and that's well beyond the scope of this article.

Likewise, if your preferred combat includes a battle map, detailed movement, and careful placement of miniatures, you're looking for a more representative combat system. You'll want to add a variety of rules supporting movement types and how they relate to combat, and you'll want to have more detailed discussions of attacks, armor, defense, and damage. In short, you're looking for a way to create an engaging and in-depth combat system.

For either route, you'll need to create some basic parameters. I've included an example system at the end of this article. Feel free to use it, modify it, and write to let us know how you've tweaked it. Comments are welcome at the Open Design forums at www.koboldquarterly.com; you'd be surprised at how often designers drop by to respond personally.

Your first concern is meshing your dispute resolution with the rest of your game system, to make sure it flows naturally and smoothly. If you use dominoes as your character generator and skill checks, you should seriously consider the use of dominoes as your combat resolution as well. Having five different ways to resolve issues may be entertaining to design, but it's a nightmare to play (unless you're playing Calvinball, in which case all bets are off).

You may want to design the combat first and generate the rest of your rules around your combat system; that's fine, but be aware that you will need to test, re-test, and smooth your gameplay with each new addition to the rules you create. Your elegant system may turn into a lumbering monstrosity if you don't exercise caution; every variable you introduce has the potential to throw the whole thing out of whack, and bolting new pieces on to address those unbalancing issues introduce issues of their own.

Attack System

With all that said, here's a checklist to help you generate your own basic combat rules set. First, you'll need to establish how to hit.

- **Determine your resolution system.** **DEADLANDS** uses poker chips and playing cards. **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** uses a d20. **AMBER** uses storytelling and ranking comparisons. **SHADOWRUN** uses dice pools with target numbers, with players rolling large numbers of dice to match or beat a 5. What's your method? Remember that you want your combat system to be portable across your design, so pick something that has broad applicability. Is this an opposed check? That is, do both the attacker and the defender take part, or is the attacker the only active participant for each check?
- **Figure out your probabilities and outcomes.** You don't need to be a mathematics genius to know basic statistics. You do need to know the basic probabilities of your chosen resolution. For example, do you know the average roll on a d6? What about a d10? What about flipping a coin? (Answers: 3.5, 5.5, and 1:1. You should also know that probabilities and odds are two entirely different creatures. See the sidebar.) Once you've figured out the probability for your system, make the average your base chance.
- **Your base chance** is an attempt by an average person using average weaponry to hit another average person with average defenses. This number may go up or down in your system depending on the modifiers you choose for this

number—but remember that the more modifiers you include, the slower your system will run. If you want your characters to be superheroes, your chance for success will rise—say, to 60/40. Conversely, if you want a grim system where failure is expected (such as **CALL OF CTHULHU**), or a system with frequent lethal hits (such as **BUSHIDO**), turn the success rate down to 45/55 or even 40/60.

- **Pick your modifiers** (if you want to include any). Your modifiers can be either positive or negative, and can include:
 - **Character traits**, such as strength, speed, wits, proficiencies, skills, and experience level.
 - **Attack types**, including ranged, melee, armed, unarmed, to subdue, or to harm.
 - **Weapon modifiers**, including reach or range, damage type (or damage type as compared to specific armors, since certain weapons are more effective against certain types of defenses; note that damage type in this instance is used purely for calculating to-hit modifiers), magical or technological bonus, or size.
 - **Target's protection**, including magical, armor, speed or agility, or natural protection. You may also consider defensive modifiers, such as Parries or Dodges in the **BASIC ROLEPLAYING SYSTEM** as part of your combat system; this is a great way to include the defender in an opposed check, if you so desire.
 - **Movement/mounted modifiers**, such as horseback, from a car, or in flight.
 - Other modifiers, such as **concealment**, **surprise attacks**, **terrain type**, or any other modifiers that you think would be appropriate to your system. If you're aiming for a level of significant detail, you may also choose to provide a modifier to target limbs and extremities.
- **Test it!** Make sure that the system can scale as your players become more proficient, and that more skilled characters can hit more frequently or more accurately than less skilled characters.

Odds and Probabilities

Odds are measured as chances against compared to chances for; probability is total chances compared to chances for. For example, let's say you have six cards. Five of these cards are black and one of them is red. You have five chances of drawing a black card and one chance to draw a red card. Thus, your odds of drawing the red card are 5:1 against (or 1:5 for). To calculate probability, you simply take the entire pool of cards (6), and ask how many red cards are in that pool. Thus, your probability of drawing the red card is 6:1

Timing System

Next, determine your timing system. That is, who attacks, and when?

- **What is the unit of time?** How long does each segment of attack/defense last? Timing determines how much action each player can realistically take in his or her turn. Make this time too long and you'll have players complaining that they could do so much more than this in real life; make it too short and they won't have any time to complete an action.
- **How much action will you allow?** When do players declare their actions, and what sort of actions can they perform? What proportion of each time segment do you allot for each action? **FOURTH EDITION DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** allows a minor action, a move action, a free action, and a standard action. You can create something similar, or allot action points with a set cost for each action the character wants to perform: reloading, movement, dropping an item, drawing a weapon, speaking, spell casting, whatever. If you choose to use action points, you'll need to include Action Point expenditures for each action the characters might undertake. You can generate your own system as well, but be sure not to overload it with possible actions: create broader categories so you can generalize specific actions into those categories.
- **How do you determine the order of action?** Do you require an initiative roll? Random draw from a deck or stack? Choose a method that is similar to your resolution system. Again, you can choose modifiers from the list above for appropriate action modifiers: speed, magical or technological bonuses, luck, experience level of the characters, and so on.
- **Outline the order of actions.** Do you require players to announce their action before or after the order of attack? Do certain actions (such as speech) take precedence over all others, or do they depend on the player's order in the order of action? This is a judgment call you'll have to make depending on the style of play you want for your combat system.
- **Test again.** Make sure the action flows the way you want it to flow, and make sure that your testers enjoy it as well. Take notes and iterate your system as necessary.

Attack Scale, Duration, and Defense

Now that you've determined your dispute resolution system and your timing system, it's time to begin the action: shots fired, spells cast, melee engaged, enemies grappled, or disengagement and flight from the foe. This is where you find out if your system works in dealing and returning fire—but before you can dish out the consequences of this action, you'll need to determine a few other factors about the sort of attacks the players are making.

- **Area of effect attacks:** These attacks cover a broad area and can potentially damage more than one person. Is this splash damage, with the damage reducing the further one is from the center of the attack, or does it deal damage equally across the area? A fireball from **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** covers a set area, while a lightning bolt from the same system travels in a straight line; those standing to the side of its effect receive no damage.
- **Personal attacks:** Does this attack affect only one person or thing, regardless of who else is nearby? Any melee attack with an ordinary weapon would fall under this umbrella, though certain attacks with larger pole arms or swords might hit more than one target.
- **Combined effects:** Can the attackers combine their attacks or lend support to each other to improve the damage, such as with the stances in **3E D&D** and later? If you allow this, you need to make sure that these abilities do not chain together to create an unstoppable team—aiding a comrade in combat should come at a cost to the helper, whether in speed, his own defenses, or his turn to attack.
- **Defenses:** Does the target have an additional chance (beyond the dispute resolution system) to evade damage or reduce the damage? For example, are they allowed saving throws against a breath weapon? **GURPS** allows for “Active Defenses” like Dodge, Parry, and Block, and the difficulty of the check has nothing to do with the success of the attack. You could go this route, or you could choose to have an active opposition. That is, the attacker rolls to hit, and the defender rolls a defense, and the person who succeeds by a greater margin wins that particular contest. You might also consider an attack matrix, as used in **EN GARDE!**, in which the players plot out attack routines and then cross-reference against each other’s attacks to determine the outcome.
- **Duration of the effect:** How long does this attack deal damage? For example, is it like an acid attack, that keeps eating away at the target, and when does it stop dealing this damage? If damage is ongoing, it might affect the target’s attacks, spellcasting, further defenses, or even incapacitate the target altogether. The effects you choose can have undue influence on the course of combat, and players may focus on weaponry that emphasizes ongoing damage to the exclusion of all others if you do not limit the effects.

Consequences of Combat

Finally, you’ll create the results and consequences of the action. This portion will mesh closely with your character generation and equipment rules, because it corresponds closely with what your characters do and carry, and how much damage of any sort they can sustain before they die, fall unconscious, automatically surrender, or otherwise end the fight. Some considerations include:

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- **Permanent damage.** This is damage that will take time to heal, absent magical or advanced medical techniques. This is damage intended to maim, kill, or otherwise cripple the target. Most weapon damage falls into this category: If you hit someone with an axe in **WARHAMMER FRP**, you are most likely attempting to end their life, and the damage you do reflects that.
 - **Temporary damage.** This damage is of the blunt weapon, unarmed combat, and subdual variety. The target can shake it off, heal within a few hours, and be otherwise functional without the aid of additional healing. Grappling, punching, striking, and kicking by non-expert martial artists, or striking with the flat of a blade or a sap, generally results in temporary damage. You may want to create your system in a way that each attack that deals temporary damage also adds a small amount of permanent damage. A shot with a blackjack still has the potential to cause brain damage.
 - **Character modifiers.** Certain types of damage may target character traits: weakening, disorienting, making it harder for the character to attack targets. Use this damage type carefully, and explain thoroughly whether it is permanent or temporary. The effects of a knock to the head can fade, while brain damage is significantly harder to heal. Likewise, a pulled leg muscle can slow a person down for a short period, while a knife to the Achilles tendon does longer-term damage. Both **THIRD** and **FOURTH EDITION DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** provide for “conditions,” effects that limit movement, open vulnerabilities, or create penalties on various attack, defense, or skill rolls.
 - **Movement modifiers.** Speaking of knives to the Achilles, your damage may include ways to cripple or slow opponents. Some damage will be permanent, as noted above; some might be as simple as caltrops in the boots, requiring opponents to take off their footgear or suffer a movement penalty. This kind of damage segues into equipment damage.
 - **Equipment damage.** Sometimes characters will want to target their enemy’s equipment, or a piece of machinery, or a door, or some other inanimate object. The rust monster from **ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** is a classic example. You may want to include a summary of how equipment and inorganic material suffers damage, and how to repair or replace it. Again, this may generate too great an encumbrance on your rules, slowing them down, which is why I come back to the next step.
 - **Test!** You want to be sure that all of your damage is consistent with the style of play you want. Do you want quick and fatal combats, with potential one-shot kills, as in **ROLEMASTER**? This is fine if your character generation is not a long and laborious process; however, if you expect your players to become involved and invested in their characters, you will want to ensure that they have at least a decent chance of survivability in a combat appropriate to their

experience level. Remember that all combat requires record-keeping, and the more caveats, modifiers, and damages you include, the slower your combat system will run.

Your consequences should include instructions on recovering from each specific damage type. If the target cannot recover from this damage, or the damage requires extensive rest, recovery, or repairs, it's essential that you outline this as well.

The most important goal of your system is the reliable entertainment of your players. Your combats shouldn't be punctuated with cries of "But that's not how it works!" or "That could never happen!" Your players should be so engrossed in the game that they are willing to overlook the occasional hitch and bump; if you've managed that, then you've done a good thing. Congratulations, and good luck.

Our System

In the interest of full disclosure, I note that I've violated the cardinal rule of this essay: I have not thoroughly tested this rule system. However, as an example and using only this essay as a guide, I created this system in under a day. If you're planning on putting a system together for widespread public use as the base of your RPG, you really should put more time into it.

Goal

Our goal is to create a moderately involved combat system for a near-future campaign setting with increasing but not automatic lethality. We want something we can play relatively quickly—that is, a single combat won't eat game night—but not so quickly that we have to invent the actions and the outcomes ourselves; we want some guidance. We also don't want to keep exact track of all the locations of the characters.

Dispute Resolution

Our basic system uses d100 (2d10) so that we can correlate the results of any attempted action with a percentage chance. We can also roll d10s to generate smaller increments of actions, skill traits, and so forth. Using firearms, attackers must roll above 55 (that is, a 45% chance), modified, for their attack to have a chance of hitting. If the target is wearing armor or moving, the rate of success drops dramatically.

Unarmed or melee combat requires an opposed roll, referencing the appropriate melee/unarmed skill, with a base (unskilled) chance of 40%; whoever succeeds by the greatest margin wins that contest.

Attack System

Because we're using d100, our average roll will be 50.5. We want an opposed check only for close-in combat, with both the attacker and the defender taking part. We will offer combat modifiers for the following:

Trait bonuses

Our character generator is a point-buy system, based on an average 50 ability, with the players using points and swaps to generate scores above average. We'll offer non-cumulative bonuses to unarmed combat for an Agility trait 60 and above (reserving the damage bonus for Strength 60 or above). We'll also offer bonuses for ranged combat with the Reflexes trait above 60.

- 60-69: +5
- 70-79: +10
- 80-89: +15
- 90-99: +20
- 100+: +25

Improved Skills

We offer three different levels of skills. Our skills include attack and defense modifiers. Our list of skills includes but is not limited to: Quick Draw, Pistols, Long Arms, Submachine Guns, Karate, Judo, Wrestling, and Bareknuckle Brawling. Our unarmed combat skills will allow defense rolls as well as attack rolls. Characters must purchase skills, and then may purchase ranks in those skills.

- Proficient: +5 to roll
- Skilled: +10 to roll
- Expert: +15 to roll

Armor

Armor includes Kevlar Vests and Body Armor. Kevlar grants a +15 to defense against firearms, and -5 to movement checks. Body Armor is +25 vs. firearms and -15 movement.

As noted above, we will allow the target defense against unarmed and melee attacks by using the various unarmed skill styles.

Movement modifiers include:

- On-foot:
 - Walking: -5
 - Jogging: -10
 - Running: -15
- Mounted (bicycle, motorcycle, horseback)

- In-vehicle
 - Speed 10-30 mph: -10
 - 30-60 mph: -25
 - 60 mph+: -40

Range modifiers will depend on the weapon; long arms will have a better modifier for distance shooting range than pistols, and pistols and shotguns will be far superior in close quarters.

Timing System

Our system will use a ten second action round, and characters will have a number of Action Points (AP) that equal (Reflexes + Agility)/100, rounded to the nearest 10. Actions will have an AP cost ranging from 1-10 AP, and may be reduced by certain skills or traits. Unarmed attacks cost 2 to 4 AP each; using a gun 3-6 AP; movement 1 AP per 10 feet.

We want to keep our combat fluid, so we don't require the players to announce what they're going to do ahead of time. Instead, they have a chance to react to what the other players are doing.

The combat round works on the countdown method. That is, at the beginning of each combat round, every participant announces the actions he wants to take, rolls a d10, and adds his AP and any surprise or initiative modifiers he might have. This number is called the Action Score. The highest scorer goes first (a tie goes to the higher Reflexes), performs his action, and subtracts the AP expenditure from that action. If his Action Score is still higher than the others, he can go again; otherwise, the highest remaining Action Score takes a turn, subtracts the AP cost for a new Action Score, and play continues in this fashion.

Attack Scale, Duration, and Defense

A variety of damage is available for attacks. We'll have grenades and rockets available, which will cover diminishing splash damage in a radius. We'll have personal attacks, both armed and unarmed. We will not allow combining effects for combat except for melee combat—when, for instance, two attackers combine to hold and then hit their target. Our system considers most kinds of aid like this to be more disruptive than helpful (if someone is trying to wrap bandages around your arm or inject you with a stimpack, it's going to throw off your attack).

As mentioned above, we will have active defenses for unarmed combat, and a chance for the target to dodge, parry, or block unarmed or melee attacks with an opposed roll; the person who rolls the greatest margin over their chance of success wins that contest. We'll add damage bonuses for high Strength with these kinds of attacks.

We will also allow appropriate defenses against area effect damage, requiring modified checks against Reflexes (e.g., to duck out of the way of shrapnel), Agility (e.g., to dodge behind cover), Fortitude (e.g., to resist acid or poison gas), and so forth. These defenses and the durations of their effects will be specifically outlined in our equipment lists.

Consequences

We will be including the various forms of damage outlined above in our system. We want to be able to beat enemies unconscious, to blow up their cars and their houses, to cause damage in all its myriad forms. To do so, we need to establish what it takes to bring a person down.

Our system relies on Health Points. Each character starts with a base of 30 HP, with a bonus derived from the character's Fortitude score. She can buy additional points with skill points.

Characters have both temporary and permanent HP, and they are equal to one another. The character's temporary HP can only be as high as the permanent pool; if a character has only 5 HP left due to gunshot wounds, he can take only 5 HP of temporary damage before falling unconscious.

Any time a character reaches 0 HP, he falls unconscious. Any permanent damage below -10 HP causes death, and temporary damage below -20 HP is also fatal (people can be beaten to death).

Our "one shot" mechanic works like this: Any time a character causes damage, he rolls the dice as indicted by his equipment or unarmed skill. If he rolls a 10 on one of the dice, he rolls for damage with that die again and adds that number to his damage; this continues for every 10 he rolls. We're doing this in order to reflect lucky shots; we want to our players to recognize that every combat could be fatal.

Rest and healing are the surest routes to recovery. Temporary damage heals quickly: within 1d10 minutes, the character regains 1d10 HP. Every ten minutes thereafter, the player rolls 1d10 again. Rest, icepacks, and bandages can all restore additional temporary damage.

Permanent damage requires first aid kits, medical care or the Doctor skill, and rest. It returns at the rate of 1 point per ten minutes, and may be hastened by artificial means as well.

Crafting a Dastardly Plot

Ed Greenwood

Sometimes, roleplaying campaigns can be like the lives of drifting, directionless teenagers: This adventure (purchased by the DM from a gaming company) happens to the players, and then that one (also bought) befalls them, giving them until the next gaming session to prepare for, yes, yet another ready-bought adventure.

So brave adventurers get hit with X and then with unrelated Y and then with also-unrelated Z.

All of which hardly seems much of a recreational getaway from one-darned-thing-after-another real life, does it?

Nor is it really much of a “campaign,” which in its older, military (and tabletop military gaming) sense, meant a series of battles and skirmishes that made up the same unfolding conflict in a particular country or “theater.”

The Whys of Adventuring

To put it another way, a heroic life—an adventurer’s life—has direction, meaning, and purpose. Mere warriors may just fight to resist whatever the world hurls at them, but adventurers set out to remake (or at least influence) the world around them by striving, through battle and diplomacy and other deeds, to Change Things. That is, to alter the land they’re in, and perhaps the region around it, by what they do.

So adventuring Player Characters, if they seek to be heroes—or tyrants or criminal kingpins, for that matter—seek to be agents of change. Change, that is, they hope to control or at least steer, to reach goals they find desirable (as opposed to overthrowing kings only to end up transforming several happy, prosperous neighboring realms into a vast lawless and devastated bandit territory, roamed by opportunistic monsters and inhabited only by the desperate who are unable to flee the area).

Awash In A Sea of Plots

Enter plot. Which can be said, in its simplest form, to be the script or outline of a story. A bestselling novel, unless it is gang-written by a group of writers all playing tug-of-war with each other, will probably have a single plot. It may be convoluted, and it may be festooned with subplots and diversions, but a professor examining the finished tale should be able to discern and write down “the” plot of the book.

Which can often be reduced to a string of statements following this rough model: “Protagonist (major or viewpoint character), finding self in this situation/dilemma/challenge, seeks to do or achieve X, but faces Y, so Z happens.”

Though there may be several protagonists (or a major character set against several minor ones) at work in the same story, and much conflict between them, a plot can be derived from all the narrative sound and fury.

This is not necessarily the case in roleplaying adventures, where many plots may collide. Every Player Character can be a major protagonist, and follow—or try to follow—their own plot. Some of them may make things up as they go along, rather than devoting much time to strategies or tactics, but if they’re pushing for specific things, what each of them does can be labeled a plot.

Not to mention the metaplot, or over-arching situation and chain of unfolding events (these countries are at war, World War II in particular, and “as our story begins, the Allied forces have just been swept from the face of Europe, and—”) described by the DM when providing the background setting, and the various dark and devious plots of the Non-Player Character villains (also played by the DM) seeking to frustrate the PC heroes.

Shackled By Story

Unlike a novel or short story, where the goal is to entertain but there’s only one ringmaster (the writer) choosing the road to that fun that the tale takes, roleplaying sessions should allow and encourage the players to shape the unfolding story. Their entertainment is lessened when DM-provided carrots and sticks are too obvious, and slain—or at least forced into gasping, staggering life support—when the sequence of events feels “railroaded.”

There's momentary satisfaction in smashing down a door, finding the Lost Gem, or finally shoving your sword through the Dread Deathheaded Dragonmage, but lasting satisfaction in roleplaying is felt by players when they achieve something meaningful, when they change the world in some small way, or take a clear, gloat-worthy step toward achieving an ambition. Players want to have an important or even dominant hand in the storytelling, and how a DM structures unfolding play should give player characters choices and something important—that feels important, even if it's not saving the entire world, every time—to do.

*“Bring on the railway track with the bound captive,
the mustache to twirl, and the scheme to endanger the
World As We Know It.”*

Until a DM knows the motivations of individual players very well, player characters are rarely going to do what a DM wants them to do. Novice DMs may write out endless “flow charts” of “if players get the gem, then this, but if they don't, then that” possibilities, but it's more fun for everyone (ever seen a sports game made up of teams that haven't practiced together beforehand? Often chaotic, but usually wild fun) to keep that to a minimum. If the metaplot a DM has worked out absolutely must reach a particular outcome (this king dies, that castle gets destroyed), the DM should work out three ways this outcome can happen before play begins, and if PC actions look likely to prevent that outcome, adjust matters so the PCs are distracted or pinned down doing something major and important (so players don't feel cheated) in one place or with one NPC while the outcome occurs in another place.

In short, fiction plots end up “set,” but roleplaying plots must stay flexible, and are best kept hidden, so the players either know or feel as if their characters are determining the plot.

Often by foiling the dastardly plots of other characters.

What Is A Dastardly Plot?

So “what the villains are up to” make up the “dastardly plots” that provide resistance to PCs in most fantasy roleplaying campaigns, forcing them into adventures, and are the plots that concern us there.

Yes (cackle), bring on the railway track with bound captive, the mustache to twirl, and the scheme to endanger the World As We Know It. Those sort of dastardly plots.

Any scheme hatched by a villain, from a ruse to frame PCs for a petty crime and so take them away from blundering into, or stopping, other schemes already being enacted by that same villain, is a “dastardly plot.” Something as small as a

secret, unwritten agreement among trade rivals not to price-war with each other at a village market, or something as great as treason against a wizard-emperor who is to be not only deposed, but slain, destroying the stability of magic over half a world and unleashing long-bound (and therefore ravenously hungry) dragons from their lairs.

Those greater plots last longer and have more influence on play. They mean more, present stiffer challenges, and of necessity are more complicated and take more time to uncover and (try to) thwart. As a result, they are what most people mean by “dastardly” plots. The “silent no-compete over the melon cart” may be just as nasty or profitable, but it’s just not in the same world-shaking league.

Yet merely defining dastardly plots is hardly the point. We need to get at what makes any plot juicy and memorable, what makes it bring a campaign to thrilling life and get players excited and eager to either join and further the plot (overthrow the hated monster tyrant, and free all the human slaves!) or to uncover and shatter it (the rebels are really shapechanged monsters, and if they overthrow the king, they’ll eat us all in the bloody civil war that inevitably follows!). So we’re after the desired elements of a truly dastardly plot.

“In any robust fantasy roleplaying campaign, the DM will arrange to have at least two, and usually four or more, plots on the go all at once.”

That is, the features of the sort of plot we want to create—if we’re the DM or players in an intrigue-filled campaign whose characters are trying to craft their own plot—if we want to have some lasting fun and build some memories of real achievement, by either following and successfully carrying out our plot, or expose and destroy a foul plot and take care of the dastardly villains behind it.

There is, mind you, no perfect plot, no single truly dastardly plot. If there was, everyone would know it, it would already have been done over and over again until the few survivors arranged things to guard against it ever happening again, and it would therefore provide us with almost no entertainment at all. So you’ll find no Perfect Recipe here. What you will find is how to stock a kitchen with juicy ingredients to craft your own killer plots.

The Truly Dastardly Plot

A truly dastardly plot has both mystery and menace. It must imperil and challenge the PCs (or the PC foes, if PCs are behind the plot), and it must surprise or attempt to mislead them or at least have unknowns they must figure out (by investigations that will inevitably draw them into adventures most people would prefer to avoid, the traps and encounters that are the meat and drink of the fighting side of a roleplaying game).

A dastardly plot shouldn't be easy to figure out. If it's obvious due to the situation (the very elderly king is dying, and six factions all vie to grab the throne, each led by, or controlling as a puppet, someone of royal blood who has a claim on the crown), then it should incorporate some Plan B and Plan C contingencies, fallbacks to be put into operation when things go wrong. (If the dying king anoints one royal as a heir, and it's not the royal of your faction, kidnap and hide that heir right away, keeping them incommunicado and powerless and spreading rumors of their death the moment the king dies—but keeping them to use if “your” royal gets killed in the strife that follows.)

These contingencies should all have been arranged beforehand by someone who thinks deeply or deviously enough to impress the players (once those players begin to see what's happening), and more importantly to enable the plot to survive collisions with the hostile plots of others.

Oh, yes, other hostile plots galore. In any robust fantasy roleplaying campaign, a DM will arrange to have at least two, and usually four or more, plots on the go all at once, even before any PC plots get hatched and going.

There's nothing wrong with plunging players into a bewildered state where they thought they knew everything that was going on in the happy kingdom their characters have grown up in, but realize that skirmishes, battles, disappearances, robberies, and monster sightings are suddenly occurring all around them with bewildering rapidity and in astonishing numbers, and they haven't a clue why, what triggered all of this, and which way to jump and swing swords next, to try to restore order. Or even to try to figure out who's a friend, and who's just a smiling foe.

A superior dastardly plot—obvious or not—should also involve some conspirators whose identity or whereabouts are unknown, and perhaps some impostors (so when PCs triumphantly kill the Pirate Lord, they discover the next morning that the real Pirate Lord is laughing at them just as triumphantly from halfway across the kingdom, and they've really killed some poor wretch—perhaps the realm's Chief Justice, or a kindly noble who has long sponsored the PCs—who was magically transformed to look like the Pirate Lord). Look at the number of Shakespeare plays that involve mistaken identity and impostors. Look at why so many of his characters pretend to be someone else. Some of the reasons are silly, but some can readily be re-used. These sort of deceptions—or any deceptions—tend to make plots last a lot longer, lead to lots of confusion and running around/adventuring possibilities, and force players to think or speculate as well as hack at whatever's nearest.

Don't Forget to Spice Things Up

Which brings us to the specialized ingredients in our plot kitchen; the spices, if you will. (No, this isn't the "sex" chapter; this time, we're talking a different sort of seasoning.) DMs, know thy players. Players planning on spinning plots of their own, know the NPCs or other players you want to deceive or defeat.

What do they find irresistible? Do they like—or hate—puzzles? Being frightened? Can or can't they resist chasing anyone who runs away, or hacking at any slithering tentacled monster they see lurking in shadows? Maybe they long to be accepted as truly noble by the snooty nobles, or have the princess say "yes" to their entreaties. Perhaps they want to swim in rooms full of gold coins, or have the power to control all the merchants in a kingdom, to set fashions or "own" powerful locals so those powerful people leap to obey their every calmly-murmured command.

Find their buttons, then craft plots that push those buttons. Or as an aunt of mine once put it, "Make those marionettes dance!" Tailor your plots to what your players or in-game foes want more of, or can't resist.

That doesn't just go for the lures that will drag others into your plots; that goes for the rewards the plots should yield them along the way.

Like a movie director, you're trying to arrange things so the action will arrive at moments when the players around the gaming table shout in triumph, or sit back grinning in satisfaction. When they solve the riddle, or finally catch and kill the marauding bandit, or (please forgive the cliché—things are clichés because they work, over and over again, remember) rescue the princess. It's your campaign, after all. The only people you have to please are your players (or fellow players). When they get bored with rescuing princesses, it's time to stop. (And be sure to slap them with a few double-crosses along the way, such as discovering the hard way that, unlike the others, this particular princess is a megalomaniacal tyrant, and "rescuing" her has set her free again to terrorize the world and everything in it, and it's all your fault.)

The important thing is to know what your players—all of them, because tastes may vary widely from one end of a gaming table to the other—will find to be satisfying rewards. Give them those rewards. Not too easily or too often, but often enough that they want to come back for more battering each gaming session. You are, after all, doing this for them (it is to be hoped).

When We Grow Mighty

Yet when we have triumphed again and again in adventures, and risen to become the meanest you-know-whats in the valley, what then? If no Masked Terror of a foe can ever hope to match us, what plots will then seem dastardly?

The easy—and so, too often used—solution is to build a super-monster, a godlike colossus of a Leviathan Uberdragon, so we go toe-to-toe against someone simply stronger. This forces us to get allies, or trick the Uber-Foe into a situation where we can collapse the castle onto it.

However, there are two less popular and therefore more attractive alternatives.

One is the Temptation Plot, where we the successful veteran face something that tempts us into folly (godhood? An emperorship?). A lure that may fool us into overreaching, so longtime foes can rush in and crush us when we fall or are made weak.

The other is the mirror of how we must fight the Uber-Foe. It might be called the Uber-Conspiracy, or Fighting Many Tiny Foes. It's when many nobles, or merchants, or monsters in an area all work together to be rid of us, and we find ourselves betrayed by those we thought were our allies, or too weak to ever dare to challenge us, or whose numbers we never thought we'd ever face in seemingly endless succession. The time when we must either find some brilliant new road to victory, or learn the old, old lesson from before we were mighty: it's time to run away, if we would live to fight another day. (When Conan once more loses it all and flees into another land to start all over again, alone and coinless.)

What We All Want

In life, everyone searches for meaning to it all, for some guidance or some sign that we're doing the "right" things, or what's right for us. We want to succeed, and we want things to make sense. To have a plot.

Yep, we want life—and the lives of fantasy characters we play—to have plots. Yet easy and clear isn't satisfying. To have some real sense of achievement, we must clear up doubt, solve mystery, and overcome some stiff challenges.

We have to struggle against dastardly plots—and win.

So our truly dastardly plots can't be hopeless, unsolvable, or unbeatable. Yet they must be formidable. They should have twists and surprises, misdirections, and blind alleys, and yet offer clear moral choices (so the characters involved, and the players behind them, can feel right about what they choose to do) and tactical choices (we can't be everywhere at once, so we have to choose to rush to the deserted castle or the dockside tavern—which is the Masked Terror more likely to visit?). This lets some failures along the way not be all our fault, yet lets us own the successes because we chose to go up against the Masked Terror at all.

And because the world needs someone to go up against Masked Terrors, and they seem in all too plentiful supply, choosing to do so can never be bad.

8

Location as a Fulcrum for Superior Design

Wolfgang Baur

Some adventures start with a villain, some start with a monster list, or a big event meant to Change Everything about the campaign. Those are all fine ways to start design for a setting and a story, and I'd say they work for fiction superlatively. But for RPGs on the tabletop or on the screen, sometimes those elements are second.

Yes, the main ingredient for me to design a worthwhile adventure is a worthwhile location.

Why Location?

There's a simple reason that location matters so much in an adventure design: It's the only story element that a game designer really controls. The heroes of the story are controlled by the players; they can go and do anything, do everything out of sequence, fight all the roleplay encounters, and talk their way out of all the fights.

They probably won't. But the players are definitely out of the adventure designer's control. They lead the adventure plot points through their decisions, but they aren't something you need to consider at the highest level.

The DM, by contrast, controls all the non-player characters and monsters, a cast of characters that you as the designer have a lot of say over. The villain, the henchmen, their motives, their stats, and their locations are all determined by your design. But I'd say that from my own experience, many Dungeon Masters don't run them as written. They improvise. They tweak, they mold and rename to match their own home game, to shoehorn it in. That's fine—well, that's great, actually—they're making the experience better for the players. But the voice, the impersonation, the details of all those characters, even their tactics, stand or fall based on how the DM feels about them. Sometimes he'll run them by the book, sometimes he won't.

The setting, though—well, that's different. As the game designer, you control the maps, the area descriptions, the flow from one encounter to the next. The dialogue, the choices of plot by PC and villain—those aren't yours to command. But the sequence, the map, and the locations are all elements that are the foundation of an adventure, and that most DMs rarely change. (Why buy a cool castle or dungeon with a map if you need to redraw the map?)

So, how can a designer make the most of this control over setting? In three ways: the ideal adventuring location must be exotic, it must be plausible, and it must be worthy of heroic investigations.

Exotic Lands

Having proposed the case for the importance of location, here's the first of my three critical ingredients: an exotic setting.

Damn few gamers want to see the wide-open prairie grasses or the well-kept crops of a peaceful kingdom in their fantasy game world. They'd rather brave the fetid Last Swamp, a place infused with the ghosts of a slaughtered army, or perhaps fight their way up the Snowy Mountains, a chill place with towering cliffs where heroes can leap from cloud to cloud on their way to the giant's castle. Going someplace where normal people would fear to tread does two things from the gameplay perspective: 1) it proves their character's heroism by daring to go somewhere difficult, and 2) it gives the whole venture, in the end, an air of accomplishment.

Now, I'd argue that the accomplishment is almost entirely illusory; do any but the most anal-retentive and novice of Dungeon Masters bother to track every pack of rations and enforce every penalty of climate, disease, and terrain? Probably not—there are monsters to throw at the players! But having strange scenery does provide some degree of heroics in those who venture there, and it makes it easy for the DM to increase the threat level with lava, avalanches, and other location-based elements.

Choosing a locale with some style is a smart design choice. It's loaded with peril and totally subjective, but I think it's fair to say that making your fantasy setting bold and brash pays off in what it implies later: the cover art, the combat setups, the terrain effects, and even the sense of a journey and exploration of the frontier or the wilderness—all great themes.

Exotic People

Now, exotic locales are much more than just geography, of course: Different cultures, different classes, and different lifeforms can all lend an air of the exotic far more effectively than the desert climate or the Fire Swamps of Bajor.

For instance, modern gamers certainly prefer the exotic over the homegrown, and designers tend to place modern-day adventures in exotic lands as well. That is, a gang of Masonic elders and redneck mercenary PCs might enjoy Vegas or Cairo more than Muncie or suburban Dallas. Yes, it might be fun to add vampires to your hometown and play that out, or nuke Miami and see what sort of mutant apocalyptic landscape your players might enjoy, but those are exceptions. Most players would rather visit Victorian London, Communist China in the Cold War, or the Incan Empire at its height. Go big in the real world.

And do the same in fantasy. The heights of the Elven Court, the mysteries of the dwarven Cantons, the world of cloud pirates, or an empire ruled by vampires—there's no reason that fantasy shouldn't immediately grasp hold of strange cultures, customs, languages, and people. Yes, the scenery is fun to describe, but this is smart design for other reasons as well. It provides incentive to explore, to ask questions, to learn the ways of this new place, to not make too many assumptions. An exotic environment rewards players who are curious, not just those who have optimized their damage per strike. A player can be both a tactical mastermind and intensely curious why the halfling empire has never been conquered from without. Provide both elements as a designer, and the DM is grateful and the players are enthralled with the setting.

Plausible

While I've just finished praising the exotic, I'll now contradict myself. The exotic is a tool, but it is so very easy to abuse. Fantasy has stereotypes for a reason: Those stereotypes work, they are grounded in the fantasy traditions of literature and gaming, and they are accessible to newcomers. Yes, dwarves love beer and elves drink wine, dwarves are smiths and elves are archers and work mithral and ancient magics equally well. The trouble many designers get into is an overemphasis on weird for the sake of weird. There's a point where flights of fantasy turn into Alice-in-Wonderland oddities that are . . . disturbing? Hard to describe, certainly.

Now, if you're going to cut against the grain on those stereotypes as a designer,

more power to you. But I'd offer two cautions to anyone discarding stereotypes in order to make the adventure more exotic. First, the further away you move from the tropes of your genre, the more original you are, then after a certain point, the less anyone will care about your wild originality. The audience will follow you to new and wonderful; most will stop at the border of weird. Indeed, fantasy gamers are inherently conservative in their fantasy tastes.

“The ideal adventuring location must be exotic, plausible, and worthy of heroic investigation.”

Humans in general and gamers in particular want “same but different” rather than “wildly original” in their stories and entertainment, and roleplaying games are no exception. The most original creations may be more acceptable to your audience if you give them a new name and a standalone role in your world: deryni rather than psionicists, kender rather than childlike kleptomaniacal halflings. After a certain point—and as the designer must know where that point is—your dwarves aren't dwarves anymore, they are uvandir (see *Kobold Quarterly* #12).

Likewise, if every city is a shining wonder of magic and pure eldritch power, the DM will wonder why he paid good money for a boring utopia of mega-magic. You need to change up the scenery in an adventure to keep it interesting. Slums can be exotic and exciting, full of their own customs, their own hierarchy, their own ability to make noble, well-fed adventurers feel like fish out of water. Or if the PCs are all gutter urchins, perhaps a visit to the harsh, orderly orphanage of the Knights of Undying Light will change things around; being asked to stand vigil all night certainly will play havoc with a young guttersnipe's usual nocturnal habits.

The idea for all these directions is simple. Give the Dungeon Master someplace new, someplace that must exist in a fantasy world, and do a better job of describing how it works and who its people are and what they want than the DM could do on his own. Give that world a sense of both strangeness to make it exciting and a sense of familiarity to keep it accessible—greed, familial loyalty, and the urge to power are universal constants, for example. This is what I mean by plausibility in setting. It must be simultaneously different, and yet not so strange that the players cannot come to grips with it. A setting built on the customs of Mesoamerica may be fascinating (see **EMPIRE OF THE PETAL THRONE**, for an example), but it will never be a mass market success, and the audience able to appreciate will always be a small one.

Make your story universal enough that everyone sees their own life reflected in it. Even if the orphan is a gnome and the city is gold rush camp in the ruins of a dwarven settlement, the collision of a child without anyone in the world and a place driven purely by money should still connect with DMs and players who have seen something of the world.

The role of setting can ground the larger issues. The orphan isn't in trouble unless the environment itself is hostile—so make sure that it is visibly hostile. The more you emphasize two or three elements of the setting—through read-aloud text, through maps, and through NPC or area descriptions—the more likely it is that the DM will pick up those elements and relay them to the players. A few short details can make all the difference to bring the setting alive.

Worthy

Finally, there's the matter of worthy settings. What the heck do I mean by “worthy” locations? This one's the hardest to define, but let me see if I can sharpen up the concept.

Heroes only get so many chances to go on an adventure. Many characters in RPGs die horribly, and even in a game with Raise Dead and Resurrection as everyday occurrences, there are still disintegrations, dragon's acid blasts, and lava pits that leave nothing to raise. And gamers only have so many hours to spend gaming so, as the designer, it is incumbent on you not to waste either heroic lives or player time.

Make those settings count. A dragon's lair should be feared for miles around, not unknown and unremarked. A dark lord should live in a kingdom or at least a fiefdom of his own, because his evil seeps into everything around him. Hiding a dark lord in a dank basement somewhere is just . . . an underwhelming milieu. Think Hollywood, in other words. If you're planning a finale for an adventure, consider your setting the way a Hollywood location scout would consider it. What's most effective for the adventure you're trying to tell: the squalid tavern down along the moldering docks, or a charred jungle full of the haunting cries of ghostly parrots, or a madcap festival of halflings, half-besotted and half-stuffed with food while devils scheme around them? Any of those might be the right setting for a different type of adventure. Think about where you'd set the final scene—and then go one better.

Here's where worthy become a little tricky, as location bleeds into plot and character. If your villain is found at the top of a crumbling keep, then make sure that keep has connections available for the DM to hook into his party. Perhaps they found an earlier clue that one member of the party is related to the bloodline that built the place. Perhaps the wizard's skill with the arcane revealed that the site is metaphysically dangerous: Too much magic here may release something buried under the castle walls, something ancient and worse than their present foe. Perhaps the castle is where the paladin or his squire fought to defend his order against overwhelming odds, and lost.

In other words, an ideal location has some connection to things greater than the characters themselves: to their family, their institutions, religions, history, and even their place in the metaphysical world. This is why Joseph Campbell goes on

about the hero leaving civilization behind, going into darkness, and returning triumphant. The place the heroes go must be worthy at that mythic level: It must be where ancient blood was spilled, sacrifices were made in a great cause, where the gods themselves reached down and changed the course of war and the course of history. That sort of setting is a frame worthy of the deeds of the current player characters—and if you’ve designed it right and the DM is on the ball, that sort of setting creates a frame worthy of new heroic tales. Make that setting rich, and deep, and you’ll be surprised at how DMs and players respond. Never think of location as just window dressing, or just a sequence of squares and fields of fire. Never design it as an afterthought.

Make it worthy, and the adventure itself will resonate with some of that sense of depth and importance and heroic story. That’s location’s role in design.

9

Myths & Realities of Game Balance

Monte Cook

Game balance is one of those things that game designers, aspiring game designers, and hard-core players talk a lot about. In many ways, it's easy to see it like the Holy Grail, Tanelorn, or some other quest object that heroes strive for but few ever reach. Like such quests, it may be that the value is in the quest itself rather than the end goal. In other words, it's the journey and not the destination that counts.

If we're going to examine game balance in a roleplaying game, however, the first question that needs to be raised must be, is game balance even possible? Is there such a thing? I think if we're going to examine this topic honestly, the answer is, actually, no. (Or rather, yes, but not in the way that most people mean—I'll get to that in a bit.)

That's right. I'll say it: In the sense of roleplaying game rule design, game balance is a myth.

But how can I, a game designer with more than 20 years experience, write such sacrilegious words? Let's really look at what we mean. Say that the most brilliant of all game designers put together a game with the goal of true game balance. He's smart, so he keeps it simple. He carefully designs every class/feat/skill/superpower/whatever in the game so that it is perfectly balanced with every other

class/feat/skill/superpower/whatever. He still has the problem of the game being out of his control. Some players are “min-maxers” and will simply take what he’s created and find the loopholes that others won’t, creating unbalanced options and characters that are better than others.

OK, let’s assume the game designer is so talented that he closes up every loophole and plugs every hole, so whether you’re a newbie or a talented rules-exploiter, there’s no combination of options that’s better or worse than any others. (In effect, the designer’s made it so that all choices result in virtually the same character.) Now the game is truly balanced, right?

Except—it’s still a roleplaying game. It’s still open-ended, based on the players’ imaginations and the GM’s prerogatives. What the characters choose to do is not going to be balanced. Some will choose to ignore their combat options and focus on their character backgrounds while others use their abilities to their fullest. Even if everyone around the table had exactly the same character, how the characters are played will be ultimately unbalanced. Worse, a GM might (accidentally or intentionally) allow one player special privileges that unbalance the game. Or even if the PCs are all more or less equal, he might throw challenges against the players that are so insurmountable or so easily overcome that the game isn’t fun. It doesn’t even hold the players’ interest.

There’s no amount of game mechanic balancing that can overcome such problems.

But What is Game Balance?

At this point, some readers may be thinking that I’m being pedantic, just arguing semantics. But since the game is meant to be played, ignoring how players use rules when striving for game balance is an exercise in futility.

When people talk about balance in game design, they are often talking about two fairly different things. The first is balance between characters. The idea is that all of the characters should be “balanced” with each other; every character has equal power. The second is balance between the characters and the rest of the game. A character who gets an ability that allows him to overcome difficult—or impossible—challenges easily makes the game unbalanced. Likewise, the reverse: A game with challenges that are far too difficult for the characters is also unbalanced. The first could be considered a measure of fairness and the second a measure of fun.

The first case—character vs. character balance—can be boiled down to how much one player (not character) can do in comparison to other players. The ultimate currency in a roleplaying game is “time to shine.” A character designed to be a terror in melee gets to shine when his character cleaves through a number of foes in battle. A character skilled at locks and other devices shines when he opens

a locked door or disables the mechanism that closes walls in on everyone. And so on. One could certainly argue, then, that a game that's balanced gives every player/character a moment to shine and that these moments are about equal in time, importance, and fun.

A common mistake, then, is to balance characters based on a single option—combat prowess, for example. If all characters have to be equally good at the same thing, you end up with characters that are mostly the same.

This is fine, but you risk a certain kind of dynamism with that approach. Since you're only focusing on one aspect, you're not really balancing the game. You're balancing one aspect of the game.

Nevertheless, most games make certain options far more interesting, appealing, or exciting than other options. This could be considered unbalanced. I'll start by pointing the finger directly at myself. The Third Edition of **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** made combat exciting through a number of different options and mechanical subsystems. A player could devote a lot of time developing characters good at certain aspects and not others, and finding new and intriguing options. A player interested in locks and mechanisms essentially had two skills to focus on, both using the same mechanic. While the melee fighter's moment to shine might last an hour or more with involved round-by-round detail, the lock expert makes a roll or two and is done.

Of course, this was intentional. We knew that most players were interested in combat, and combat makes it easy to produce exciting action sequences that are challenging and engaging for a whole group of people around the table—much more so than picking a lock. If we had decided to make every activity as involved as combat, it would have made the game cumbersome. Still, this all means that as game designers we intentionally “unbalanced” the game in favor of combat. We left it up to the GM and the players to balance combat with non-combat activities as they wished. For some, the game would be nearly 100% fighting. For others, interacting with NPCs, with the environment, or with each other would equal or even outshine battles, but that wasn't a matter of balance for the rules.

The second type of balance, dealing with characters and challenges, may seem related, having to do with characters being either too powerful or not powerful enough. At its core, though, such balance is a different issue because it has less to do with the players and more to do with the GM.

After all, it's the GM who is responsible for providing challenges for the characters—and the GM has no boundaries or limitations. When GMs complain about unbalanced characters running roughshod over their campaign and how that's the fault of the game, there is a misunderstanding of the role of the GM. You don't bring a knife to a gunfight. If the PCs wipe the floor with the vrock, give them six vrocks to fight next time. Or a nalfeshnee.

No, it really is that simple. For every spell, there's a counter. For every monster, there's a tougher monster. If the players raise the ante by creating characters who are too powerful, the GM can simply use the sliding power scale of the game (which has no upper limit) to bring things back into balance.

What's more, the GM is also the arbiter of the rules at the table and can disallow options. Ultimately, it's the GM who truly understands what's going on at the table, not some game designer thousands of miles away. No matter what the designer does or doesn't do to balance the game, it's a moot point. An illusion at best. It's what the GM does that provides the balance.

The Gamers' Social Contract

So here's the real secret of game balance: There is such a thing, but it has very little to do with rules and game designers. It emerges from the cooperation of the people sitting around the table. It comes from the players and, in particular, the GM. It all has to do with mutual trust.

When people sit down at my game table, I expect two things from them. The first is that everyone is responsible for making the game fun for all involved. The second is to trust the GM to provide a fun and balanced play experience. This is the gamers' social contract: the agreement that everyone makes, consciously or unconsciously, at the beginning of every game session.

With the idea that the two axes upon which the wheel of balance turns are time to shine and reasonable challenges, the GM can provide both in a way that the rules never could. A really good GM can run a balanced game where one player is a 20th level demigod and another is a 1st level farmer. All he has to do is make sure that each player has fun and each character has something interesting and challenging to do. I'm not contending that it's easy—on the contrary, it's very difficult. That's why good game designers try to provide tools for GMs to make running a fair, balanced game easier. Well-designed rules make it easier for the GM to judge what he should and shouldn't do, and maybe even protect him so that when he makes a mistake, the game doesn't go wildly off the rails.

For the GM to provide a fairly stable play environment, however, the players have to trust him and have to agree not to use their own position at the table to undermine or circumvent his actions or otherwise spoil the game for others. So it's not just about the GM. It's about the entire group.

Getting players and GMs to understand the social contract is the key to true game balance. The first rule of every RPG should be, "Don't be a jerk." This rule, if adhered to perfectly, would likely eliminate almost all balance problems of any stripe. The players should trust the GM to ensure that no matter what happens and no matter what choices they make, the game will be fair and fun. The GM should be able to trust that no one's going to intentionally try to break the game,

and if the GM determines that something is going to undermine the fairness and fun, he can overrule it.

A roleplaying game, sitting on a shelf, is a rudderless ship. It's not until a GM and players use it and inject their own balance that the ship can be steered to go where it needs to go.

10

Buckets in the Sandbox:

Non-Linear and Event-Driven Design

Wolfgang Baur

Blame it on **GRAND THEFT AUTO**'s wide-open playspace, or blame it on the advent of mega-dungeons and meandering plots, but the buzzword for adventure design the last few years has been “sandbox design.” This seems like a straightforward concept: The action is determined almost entirely by the players, because the setting is just a sandbox full of toys, enemies, and interesting locations. There's no need to create a plot arc. It's the opposite of running an adventure on the rails—telling the story in a linear fashion—because it's all up to the players to decide what needs doing. Let them figure out how to approach the end boss, or for that matter, let them figure out who the end boss is.

Well, not so fast.

Just because an adventure has an open structure doesn't mean it has no structure. All too often, a game designer will plop down a bunch of locations, throw some missions or quests on top, and call it a sandbox design.

I can say with some confidence that's nonsense. That's just lazy design. A more successful approach to sandbox design offers hidden structure that is never imposed on the players, but that does provide crucial tools and information to the DM. Don't let “sandbox” be a synonym for “lazy.”

Structure in a Sandbox

A good sandbox design may appear haphazard and freeform to the player, but if it is designed well, it still has structure and design intent behind it. Though there's no plot arc or linear encounter sequence to plan out, the work still needs to hang together to make a satisfying game experience, whether you are talking about **GRAND THEFT AUTO** or the most recent underdark campaign.

In my experience, designers use at least three forms of structure in a sandbox, each of which can be used to varying degrees by a clever designer: non-linear structure, bucket structures, and event triggers.

Non-linear Structure

Non-linear structure is the traditional approach to sandbox design: You work to make a whole experience for the players, but that whole is not dependent on sequencing. The NPCs do what they do while the players wander around, acquiring clues, treasures, and information about where to go next. This form of design is ideal for embedded mysteries, dungeon adventures, and lost cities, all of which are wide open areas that should at the very least provide an illusion of elastic, flexible story—and more often, should actually provide that elastic story element somewhere under the surface.

In a non-linear structure, the adventure can be completed in any sequence, as the PCs find elements scattered around the area (or even elements found in several loosely linked geographic areas), and then decide how to proceed based

Branching Structure

Once a path is chosen, it becomes harder to go to another path. The ultimate example of such adventures are pick-a-path books, but the idea applies to any situation where some player choices are irreversible. If you save the orphan, she's grateful for the rest of the adventure; if you let the slavers carry her off and there are witnesses, your character's reputation is stained and your character is not trusted by street urchins for the rest of the adventure. The players have choices at every stage, but ultimately may reach wildly different conclusions regarding what the adventure is about. This is a variant of the triggered structure, but can be built as a set of linked choices that each affect the state of the sandbox until a final choice sets up the finale.

The more general case of triggered or event-driven structure isn't as tightly linked; it can be a set of completely independent events or triggers that only affect subsections of your adventure area. The tightly-knit branching structure is really just a railroad adventure with two or three tracks that tend to weave back on themselves, rather than a true set of tree-like branches, which would rapidly become unwieldy.

on the information they have. The key design element is that sequence doesn't matter; if there are four clues, the PCs need all four to get the solution right (or three and a lucky guess!). If the adventure requires them to visit a few sites, they can do so in any order and expect that the challenges will still make sense. Another way to think of non-linear adventures is that they are essentially the same as the plot coupon approach discussed in **KOBOLD GUIDE TO GAME DESIGN, VOLUME 1**.

In a certain sense, what this means is that you need to design each encounter as an independent mini-adventure, each not depending too heavily on anything outside itself. Each encounter needs to have a clear beginning, conflict, and hooks for further action. In a true sandbox, some encounters might be repeated, so you may want to design for that possibility explicitly, with first and second visits offering elements that change over time. Another option (if your sandbox is more about exploring time than geography) might be to set a schedule for the inhabitants of a place—as was done with **GRYPHON'S LEGACY**, an introductory adventure I wrote that describes the inhabitants of a border castle and where they might be found day, evening, and night.

If you design the non-linear structure with a heavy emphasis on character reactions, I'd argue you are creating an event-triggered design (see page 38). Some might say event-driven adventures aren't sandboxes at all, but they clearly share the element of wide-open player options; those options are merely constrained from time to time when player actions trigger some event. Thus, many of the same principles apply, even though an event-driven adventure might be more plot-heavy and less player-driven than other approaches.

Bucket Structure

The bucket is a style of limited sandbox, if you like. Rather than a single large play environment, the adventure is designed with two or more such environments. At certain points, the action shifts from one such environment to another: the bucket, in other words, is poured out into another bucket. Thought of another way, the sandbox is scooped up into two or three buckets, or two or three smaller sandboxes.

This is tipping-point design, which I used in my design for **COURTS OF THE SHADOW FEY**. The idea here is that the environment exists in one form until the players, an NPC, or a timed event changes everything. It's similar to triggered structures discussed above, though I think of bucket structure as the extreme case of triggered structure. That is, a triggered structure is a character-level design approach: In a sandbox this might mean that you've made an enemy, or foiled an assassin, or learned the location of a crucial clue, triggering a chase sequence.

But in a bucket structure, it's not the relationship between characters or the understanding of the players that flips. It's the whole nature of the sandbox. The

whole adventure suddenly changes when a zombie invasion hits the sandbox, or when all gang members are wiped out overnight and the PCs are hunted, or when the dragon in the dungeon finally wakes up and every creature for miles around panics. It's a change of state for the entire environment; the sandbox has flipped out of the frying pan and into the smelter.

This structure addresses two problems with a simpler sandbox: the paradox of choice and the lack of closure. I'll get to the closure element in the "Sandbox Pitfalls" sidebar, but let's discuss the paradox of choice for a moment. The problem that some groups and DMs have when given a sandbox adventure is that, while there are plenty of monsters to kill and strange realms to explore, there are actually too many NPCs and too many areas to choose from. If given a choice, they don't know where to start or what to rate as most promising. It all starts to feel either completely arbitrary ("Let's roll a d8 to choose which tunnel to explore!") or overwhelming ("How big is this city anyway? Where the heck are those efreeti lords we were warned about?").

If the party is expected to explore every element of a sandbox, things can drag. One way to limit this is through these forced transitions I call buckets, but there's an older name for them as well: levels. Dungeons with one-way doors and sliding passages essentially do the same thing as a bucket design. You can't go back to the old state once you've slide down the slimy tunnel, and you can't go back to the pre-zombie-invasion state without first completing the adventure either.

The Classic Sandbox Pitfall

Though some gamers might consider railroad or linear adventure designs less desirable than sandbox or open-frame designs, the sandbox style is not without its own problem. From the design perspective, the greatest trap is concentrating too much on a locale's or NPC's backstory and history, rather than on elements visible or discoverable to the players. This is a natural tendency; if you can't really talk about plot elements in a concise way, some designers will talk about how a place or character came to be.

Resist this urge.

The elements of a sandbox that matter are those that players see and interact with. The backstory or history may be important, but rarely is it important enough to rate more than a paragraph of description. NPC action and motivation with respect to the heroes are valuable; their inner life, their past, and their relationship with their minions should be considered skeptically. Focus on the here-and-now of the adventure and the action, and your design will provide more and stronger tools for the DM to use in actual play.

Triggered Structure

The PCs are free to wander the sandbox as they will, poking at creatures and characters. This approach is ideal for city and castle political and intrigue adventures, in which NPC reactions are the main driver of the action. Who knows what and when is the crucial design element that you need to prepare for the DM. Lists of rumors, gossip, and information as well as red herrings need to be tracked in some fashion—and the easier you make the drop-in pieces or triggers for the DM to use, the more successful your design will be.

In most cases, a triggered design can be more-or-less linear or at least can lead up to a climax—these are not sandboxes at all, but rather triggered event-driven plots.

However, triggers can be “sandboxy” just as easily as they can be linked to plot elements. The decision is yours as a designer. If the results of triggering a certain event are that the plot advances, and the only way to succeed in the adventure is to advance the plot in a particular sequence, well, you’ve designed a linear adventure (not always a bad thing; many excellent games are built this way). If each event or trigger affects only a particular character or location instead of the meta-plot, then the triggers can be part of a sandbox. The party may have made an enemy, they may have rescued a grateful henchman, they may have destroyed a tool they might need later. None of these need to advance the plot. Some triggers—the bucket ones discussed below—do move the character from one location to another, or from one social class to another, or otherwise change the setting and conditions of the adventure.

So, the linear element of triggers is not absolute; various event triggers can release mayhem for a short time but not affect the adventure’s ultimate goals. As a designer you should weigh carefully how big each event is and how much it changes the setting. Big changes are fun (“I’ll flood the whole dungeon!”), but they can start to feel arbitrary or unfair if the players don’t see the trigger as a consequence of their action. For this reason, timers and chronologically-driven adventures are (rightly) derided as linear and railroad-ish. Some scenarios make this work wonderfully, with a sense of impending doom and a clear message to players about what they need to do to avert catastrophe. But these sorts of timed triggers have little place in a pure sandbox, where events should unfold at a pace of the players’ choosing.

Ultimately, the sandbox triggers will feel more “natural” if the party’s actions always trigger a collapse or setback or plot advance. From a design perspective, you must decide how many NPCs or bits of information they need to find the boss or move to the finale. And this leads to one of the paradoxes of the sandbox approach: though driven by player choices, your finales are often predetermined, even if nothing else about the adventure is.

The Set Pieces of a Sandbox

Although a sandbox is all about providing maximum player options, it doesn't get a designer off the hook for preparing both excellent set pieces to get the ball rolling, as well as a satisfying finale. Sandbox design often stumbles in providing adventures with closure, because with so many plot threads, characters, and hooks dangling all over the place, inevitably the players will not pick up every element. Inevitably some elements are left lying around at the end of the story.

Let's examine these problems in sequence.

To start a sandbox adventure off, you need either a big bang that lures the party to the locale ("Look, an invasion/murder/gold rush/revolution!") or you need a place that is simply boiling over with issues, dangers, resentments, and impending mayhem. Either approach works, and ideally you don't just pick one or three hooks and develop them, but actually brainstorm dozens of possible hooks and bake them in throughout the descriptions of a city, or the NPC descriptions of a court, or the monster descriptions for a mega-dungeon. The more hooks you have into side plots that are apparently unrelated, but that form a larger pattern, the more chances the DM will have to see that his party picks up those clues over time-arrows and indicators that all point roughly in one direction or another.

The sandbox hooks should slowly lead the PCs to realize that, yes, they could slaughter everything in sight, but there's something bigger going on as well. These hooks may be repeated and obvious (better for some play styles) or hidden and quite obscure (for more advanced groups or longer arcs). Frankly, I've had good success designing these very much as a list (events, gossips, clues) and letting the DM sort out when and where to reveal them. The pace at the table and the group's play style should have some influence on the speed at which the adventure progresses from raw exploration to a more focused set of efforts at a player-chosen goal (but likely one of a set of choices baked into the design).

That is, you offer adventure hooks to get the action underway, and then you provide a huge variety of options that eventually narrow down to one, two, or maybe even three options for a finale. In some adventures, who the PCs align themselves with early on will determine who they face in the finale. For instance, a sandbox adventure in a city riven by dueling factions pretty much requires that the PCs make an alliance with one group and defeat the other in the end. Such a battle becomes the set piece of the finale.

One of the dangers of a sandbox adventure is that it can feel aimless, meandering, and ultimately dull, because there's too little going on below the surface. Experienced players are remarkably quick at picking up clues and hints. Anyone with a sense of narrative knows "how this goes"—but in a sandbox, it's up to them to play along with that expectation, or not. As the designer, you should probably plan for one most likely contingency, for example, a raid on a gang boss's

house, as well as a secondary contingency, such as the party aligning itself with that boss to take down a rival. In either case, the details of how that scene play out will be determined by the player and the DM—but a good adventure design provides the key statistics, maps, descriptions, and grace notes that make that finale memorable.

In music, grace notes are accents or flourishes beyond the main melody. In game design it's the same way—throwaway bits of dialogue that sound badass (but establish the villain's character), a nasty bit of necromancy that shows the villain's black heart, or even a dramatic reading of the villain's monologue—while minions move in from every side to flank the heroes. Those are the elements that a DM needs to properly deliver the finale. Provide those keystone elements, and the sandbox adventure will end on a high note.

Assumptions in a Sandbox

Some might say that it's wrong to assume certain actions on the part of the players, that this is somehow linear storytelling. This is nonsense. Good design always presupposes that player actions in a game are at least 80% predictable; most groups will try to take the treasure, most groups will try to rescue the princess. Just because some groups don't is no excuse for not supporting the many DMs whose groups do follow the most common sequences of events. Most players do play good characters, and most players do want a D&D game filled with action and adventure. As long as the scenario supports that, you as the designer are supporting the DM in delivering maximum play value for their hard-earned dollar.

Frankly, if a DM's group never takes the bait for a hook and never follows the predicted path for most heroes, the group likely has bigger problems than a badly-designed sandbox scenario.

11

Collaboration and Design

Wolfgang Baur

I've done a lot of design collaborations over the years, some with success, some without. The first I can remember was working with Steven Kurtz on "A Rose for Talakara" for *Dungeon Magazine* #25. It was a big hit and generated a lot of fan mail. About 8 years later, the collaboration with Monte Cook on **DARK*MATTER** was quite different, but seems to have generated a lot of positive attention as well. And now I've collaborated in different ways and to differing degrees on the various Open Design projects.

Each of those projects gave me insight into what works and what doesn't. Here are seven hard-won lessons that will help you improve your chances of completing a successful project.

1. Pick a Dictator

The design collaboration process is many fine things, but democratic is generally not one of them. In the video game world, the dictator is usually a design lead or senior designer, and the collaborator just a regular designer, junior designer, or level designer. In RPGs, the distinction is often between the in-house designer (who always has final say) and a freelancer (who always draws the short straw).

Ultimately, it doesn't matter how you set up the roles so long as someone has the authority to 1) stop discussion, 2) enforce decisions once they are made, and 3) veto creative dead-ends. I've worked on at least one project with multiple designers all treated as peers, and it was horrible. No one could override anyone

else. Everyone felt their approach was best. No matter what was proposed, the others tore it down. The project ended in a creative stalemate and did not produce publishable work.

There's a reason that species develop hierarchies as they evolve more and more social traits. Without hierarchy, too much effort is wasted in infighting and duplicate effort. Having one dictator, benevolent wise elder, or the boss's nephew making decisions is far more efficient. I'm a fan of democracy in politics, but not in the creative world.

2. Maintain Forward Momentum

In general, forward momentum is critical in collaborations. Dithering and delay will lead you out of the golden honeymoon period without much getting done (see the chapter on "Creative Mania and Depression"), and one or more of the collaborators into growing dissatisfaction.

My general sense of collaborative design failures is that projects collapse when decisions are allowed to be revisited over and over, when decisions aren't made in a timely way, and when too much time is spent on minutiae or material invisible during play instead of in creating usable design elements. These are all failures of collaboration, when one designer is trying to have it all their way. So when I doubt, I err on the side of pushing ahead. Attempting to nail every decision perfectly is a recipe for creative stalling ("The perfect is the enemy of the good," as Voltaire reminded us). Stalling is what leads collaborations into slow waters. You need to keep surfing the rapids to reach a first draft.

This is why that dictator is vital. Even if the leader's decisions are horribly wrong, good game design includes iterative processes that will find and correct the failure. Development, prototyping, internal playtesting, and user testing all find bad design. The price of fixing it in a later stage is lower than the price of never reaching that later stage at all. Putting an imperfect rules set or story arc out for review in a beta form is always preferable to thrashing around before reaching a beta stage.

Given a choice, always emphasize daily and weekly progress, rather than complete agreement on all points.

3. Minimize Creative Differences and Shut Down Attention Hogs

That requirement for progress is, of course, where things can go seriously wrong. Collaborators who disagree don't want to move on, even if they are outvoted and their arguments go nowhere. This is where jealousy, sabotage, and general ill feelings can arise. No one likes to feel ignored. No one likes to see their darlings shot down.

Unfortunately, designers can't afford to have too much ego invested in a particular approach, or they'll never survive a teamwork-based project. It's a paradox. Designers need ego to craft rules and worlds, and need to have immense confidence to put those materials up for the bashing typically inflicted by testers, developers, editors, and managers. Everyone wants to leave their mark and claim credit for the good ideas. Ego is required to propose and defend novel solutions, new genres, and new mechanics that overturn orthodoxy.

At the same time, designers who fight hard for bad ideas are doomed as professionals. If you can't let go of the midnight flight-of-fancy that everyone else hates and that even your boss at the design studio smirks at . . . well, you turn into a crank: "Oh, that Frank, he's always trying to push FTL ships into every space game," or what have you. Designers need to be a lot more flexible than that, and never more so than in collaborations where your charming and lovable quirks run headlong into your collaborator's lovable eccentricities and fancies.

My advice is to fight hard for your ideas with the best data you have, the most stirring rhetoric you can muster, and the most Machiavellian deployment of politics and favors you can pull together. I exaggerate slightly on the last point: Machiavelli would probably not recommend collaboration but, rather, extermination or isolation, and you should not lie to or deceive your fellow collaborators. However, I would urge you to consider the reactions and alliances you can form around a design that is the work of many hands. Simply put, collaborative design does include some of the same stresses and problem as politics in other environments. If your efforts fail to win the day, quit. There's no sense being a damn fool about it.

Remember: There are more game design ideas in the world than there are hours in a lifetime to work on them. If one doesn't pan out, abandon it ruthlessly and commit yourself wholeheartedly (not grudgingly or with silent sabotage!) to the new direction. You'll be hailed a man of reason, you'll win friends, and you'll even be able to say later, "Well, we went with your idea back in the Tutorial, so hear me out for this part. . . ." A little humility among game designers is a virtue that can pay powerful dividends.

4. Know When to Fire a Collaborator

While humility and a little careful advocacy can work wonders in collaboration, the more frequent problem is that of designer ego sabotaging the collaboration entirely. Some designers are convinced they should take the design lead position and that their take on issues is the correct one. One session of playtesting or user testing is usually enough to convince the designer in question that this is not the case, but some egos don't even agree when the playtesters all balk.

That's when someone needs to have a heart-to-heart with that massive ego, and either talk them into working collaboratively with others, or fire them from the

project. If a collaborator can't or won't take feedback and cannot take "no" for an answer, then they don't have the right temperament for collaboration and would be better served working on their own. Maybe the resulting game will be heralded as genius. Maybe it will fade into obscurity. In either case, it will stand or fall without impeding the progress of large, collaborative, team-based work.

If you find you can't work with someone, ask the dictator to shrink the group. Most lone-wolf designers will be happier to strike out on their own, and your group will move toward a finished design faster if you aren't always wrestling with a "never wrong" team member.

5. Know Your Design Strengths and Style

Not everyone has the temperament for collaboration. And even those who do may choose only to collaborate rarely; it requires sharing ideas and accepting that some of your proposals may be rejected. Likewise, it requires you to establish good reasons for rejecting the proposals of others. This creative seesaw (when it works) results in stronger work for everyone. In really powerful, long-term collaborations, you'll find there's a division of labor into types.

In musical collaborations, you'd see this in the division of songwriting into melody and lyrics. In game design for RPG adventures, you might see one collaborator working on the flavor, characters, dialogue, and story/quests, and the other working mostly on tactics, mechanics, and rules-based triggers for action. Or you might see one designer working mostly on level design and maps, while another works on monster design, and a third on treasures and equipment.

This works best if you already know and agree on what your strengths and weaknesses are. Collaboration teaches you at least as much about yourself as it does about your partners in crime. They will certainly point out your flaws, gently or otherwise.

6. Build Up Trust: Love Truth, But Forgive Error

The Internet style of flamewar and attack is anathema to collaboration; such attacks in a close collaboration are entirely destructive. Yes, you want to fight hard for your ideas and defend them, but winning the argument by savagely deconstructing a partner's design pitch or rules sketch weakens their confidence in their abilities (and remember—confidence and ego are vital to a successful designer) while reducing their trust in you.

In collaborations, you need to find a communication style that works for both sides. One partner may love rough-and-tumble critique of anything and everything, while the other prefers only to offer constructive suggestions and never cuts loose with a flat-out "that stinks and here's why." That collaboration may find an equilibrium if both partners are looking for one. But you have to

be watching for what reactions you get, and this is why collaboration is easier in person or at least by phone—you get more tone, inflection, and body language to work with, so you know when your critique has gone too far. Be kind at first, and as you build up a rapport and sense of trust, see how your collaborators respond. You always want to be kind in your critique, of course, but sometimes the kindest critique is to say, “I think this idea doesn’t work.” In other words, ramp up your level of honesty over time, as you learn to trust your design partner’s instincts and your own ability to understand what arguments and design theories matter to others on the project. If you find yourself unable to accept any of the ideas put forward by others, consider that perhaps you are best off designing on your own rather than in collaboration—or at least, better off with other design partners.

7. Critique With Kindness, Revise Ruthlessly

In the end, collaboration depends on your ability to both give and take criticism. There’s no way around it, because two or four or ten brains working on a single problem need to align all sorts of elements to forge a better whole. If you can’t offer critique in a way that other collaborators can hear and accept, if your style is either too abrasive or too shy and passive, your collaboration will fail.

So there’s a fine line. You must be honest in your critique, without throwing flamebait. Compassionate critique is what I’d advocate. Keep the discussion on what the text says, how the rules function, what the math or the playtest data shows. Never, ever descend into personal attacks.

Likewise, when you are hearing critiques or reviewing a marked-up document as you try to unify a design, try not to take it personally. Your work can be improved. Even a flawed critique will deepen your understanding, as you will have to put together the reasoning for why the critique is flawed. Try to accept criticism with good grace, and if you can’t, step away from the keyboard for an hour or overnight before responding.

Why Bother to Collaborate?

The golden rule certainly applies in collaboration, and beginning designers may find the prospect of seeing their work shot down often (or being asked to justify their modifications of a collaborator’s design) intimidating. Part of the joy of tabletop RPG design is the pure fun of having no limits, of doing whatever one likes with a clean slate and no CGI budget to worry about. So why would anyone ever limit that?

Because when things go right, the end design will be richer, the workload will be reduced, and you’ll provide stronger, better material to the audience. A great developer or editor sometimes provides this level of added effort, but that’s not

their main function. Designers should bring strong ideas and sharper game play; the competitiveness that develops as people try to top one another's best is where collaboration takes flight. Design ego forces you to do your best or else admit that your collaborator is pulling more of the weight. That's powerful incentive to really deliver.

A collaboration that is really ticking is one that allows you to improve on your partner's weak points, while they help you cover your own. When you read the result, you'll see that it is greater than the sum of its creators alone.

12

Failure and Recovery

Wolfgang Baur

The file is corrupted. Your pitch was shot down—hard. Your project was completed, but cancelled and never printed. You designed it and they printed it, but . . . well, it sucks, and everyone tells you so all day long.

Welcome to being a successful game designer.

With any public project produced under deadline to high standards, the odds are you won't always get it right. I certainly haven't. There are several projects I regret because the realities of publishing meant they went to the publisher at a level I wasn't happy with, the publisher didn't deliver the playtesting or map resources I hoped for, the fans just hated what I did with part of the setting, or the editor changed my favorite sentence to suck all the joy out of it.

As the designer, you think you have control over a game design project—and you do have a lot of control over the foundations and the execution. But you don't have complete control. Sometimes a project is judged on elements—like art, a graphics rendering engine, or an index—that you don't control at all.

No matter why the project might be considered a failure, it's still your name on the cover, and you need to defend that work or move past it. It's okay to fail, of course. Everyone does. But you can't do it often and stay a freelancer because no one will hire you again.

Fail early in the process if you can. Fail often if you must, and defend the failures you can't change. But don't accept failure in your work or excuse it. Here's how to reduce the risks of failure and become the designer with the golden touch.

Fail Early

If at all possible, fail in your game designs when they haven't even gone to an editor yet. Fail at the in-house playtest. Fail in front of patrons in Open Design. Fail with your first readers and a few trusted, sharp minds who review the project before it goes anywhere. Fail before it matters much.

This is by far the easiest failure to fix. Yes, you are perhaps somewhat embarrassed in front of colleagues, friends, or family, but that's nothing compared to being embarrassed by the same failure in the wider public world.

Some designers resist failure. They become so committed to an idea that they can't see it won't work, or they refuse to listen to the first readers, playtesters, developers, editors, or anyone else. You need to have enough perspective to know when you have a good, original, workable idea that other people will appreciate once you've got it polished and all the edges tucked in neatly—or when you have a shiny turd with beautiful components but no replay value, no sizzle, and no spark of originality.

Don't assume that those who criticize you are trying to thwart your dreams. They may be saving you from a horrible, face-planting disaster.

Defend It

Let's say that the design failure gets past everyone and makes it into a finished game or system. You're going to have to own that failure in mechanics or worldbuilding. This is the part of failure that may make you grit your teeth. I believe that defending a mistake in worldbuilding or setting design is much more painful than it need be for mechanical or rules failures. Here's why.

The skill challenge mechanic in **4E** was pretty much a mess when the new edition of **D&D** shipped; players and DMs didn't understand it, and the math was all wrong. The initial response from Wizards of the Coast (WotC) (as I remember it) was, "Oh, that's the way it's supposed to work." The rules were perhaps comprehensible to someone who had taken part in all the hard work and in-house playtests and discussion at WotC. But the fact that they met with widespread confusion, rejection, and immediate house rules was a pretty clear sign that they didn't work for the wider world. The assumptions behind those rules—and as it later turned out, the math underpinning the mechanics—were flawed.

Declaring, "It's fine, really," is not necessarily the best move when a mechanic is truly broken, but at least it started a conversation that led to wholesale revision

and errata, changing all the numbers associated with those rules. In addition, the company launched an online column devoted more or less entirely to showing the WotC assumptions and methods for using skill challenges. The mechanic was fixed in later printings of the core rules and the rules subsystem is stronger now than it was at launch. The initial failure of the mechanics has largely been forgiven and forgotten, and gamers are pleased that new system works for their purposes.

The worse example of defending failure is in cases where something can't be fixed. The most recent **FORGOTTEN REALMS** reset upset a lot of long-time fans and got a lot of bad press, but there's just no way that Hasbro could admit fault and say, "We didn't mean it. No Spell Plague; we'll put it back a better way." They took a creative risk by advancing the timeline and killing off popular characters, but once they took the risk they owned it, success or failure. In a shared world setting, failures are painful because you have to live with the failure and take the heat from fans, sometimes for years, before the next reset allows you to fix it.

And in the case of the **FORGOTTEN REALMS** and other setting changes, it's arguable that the company's goal of making the setting more accessible was achieved, even if it came at the price of long-term fans. Every shared world has times when it needs to annoy the fans for its own long-term health. What is considered a failure by the audience may still be marked a success by the publisher.

Setting Failures

When you commit to a setting, it's impossible to fix it. This is why fantasy RPG settings are inherently conservative; any change will be considered a mistake by some member of the fanbase. The safest course for a large corporation to manage its intellectual property is to offer a lot of action and adventure—but like a TV comedy, to make sure none of that changes the default premises of the setting.

So, what do you do?

Move past it and learn from it.

Those are really your two most professional options. Moving past it may mean creating errata, ignoring canon elements or regions of a setting that aren't working, or updating the timeline with further material in a novel or later adventure.

The School of Hard Knocks

Learning from failure is the obvious lesson here. When designers are burned by mechanical failures, most tend not to repeat their errors. There's not much you can do about art failures, editing, marketing or other elements, other than being sure to provide full support to those groups when asked. Learn to provide the best core design you can, and then learn to let go so that graphic designers, editors, and others can do their work.

If you don't move past it or learn from it, there is a third road: Blame everyone else and accept no responsibility—learn nothing. This is also referred to as “Leaving the RPG field,” because it is professional suicide. I don't recommend it.

There's one last option to fix really large, systemic failures of the rules: note the problem in your design records and make sure to fix it in the next edition. That's how you build a career rather than merely designing a single game.

Failure is a discouragement, certainly, and never fun. Remember the happiness of a successful design, a good review, and fan mail. Some setbacks are inevitable in even the most exciting, rewarding forms of work, and most of those setbacks are great opportunities to grow as a designer, to learn where a piece went wrong, and add new tools to your design toolbox. It's a small price to pay for doing what we love.

Contributor Biographies

Wolfgang Baur...

...is the publisher and founder of Open Design, the collaborative game design company. He has edited **KOBOLD QUARTERLY**, **DRAGON**, and **DUNGEON** magazines, and the publisher of the **KOBOLD GUIDE TO GAME DESIGN** series.

He is the author of dozens of award-winning adventures for **ALTERNITY**, **CALL OF CTHULHU**, **PATHFINDER**, and four editions of **D&D**, as well as a handful of short stories, two card games, many magazine articles, and several campaign settings, including the modern conspiracy setting **DARK*MATTER** with Monte Cook. He worked with Colin McComb on the original **PLANESCAPE** line at TSR. Wolfgang is the winner of the Diana Jones Award for Excellence in Gaming, and writes frequently on games and roleplaying at koboldquarterly.com.

Monte Cook...

...was one of the three principal designers of **THIRD EDITION D&D** and the d20 system. His d20 design studio, Malhavoc Press, produced award-winning products like **MONTE COOK'S ARCANA EVOLVED**, **PTOLUS**, and the **BOOKS OF ELDRITCH MIGHT**. Monte has worked in the game industry since 1988 on **D&D**, **CHAMPIONS**, **ROLEMASTER**, and more. He also created **HEROCLIX**, **D20 CALL OF CTHULHU**, and **MONTE COOK'S WORLD OF DARKNESS**.

He lives in Wisconsin with his wife Sue, a talented and respected editor of game products and fiction. Monte has published two novels, numerous short stories, countless articles, and a comic book series for Marvel. He is a graduate of the Clarion West Writer's Workshop and his recent nonfiction book is **A SKEPTIC'S GUIDE TO CONSPIRACIES**, and his current game-related work can be found at dungeonaday.com.

Ed Greenwood...

...is the creator of the Forgotten Realms fantasy world-setting, an award-winning game designer, and a *New York Times*-bestselling author whose fantasy novels have sold millions of copies worldwide in more than thirty languages. A well-padded, white-bearded librarian often mistaken for Santa Claus, Ed was once hailed as “the Canadian author of the great American novel,” and shares an old farmhouse with more than 80,000 books.

Right now, he’s at work on several Open Design projects, and writing his usual three novels at once. Currently, look for **ELMINSTER MUST DIE!** from Wizards of the Coast.

Rob Heinsoo...

...designs roleplaying games, card games, board games and miniatures games. He led the design of the fourth edition of **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** and wrote or led the design of many of its sourcebooks, including **DIVINE POWER**, the **FORGOTTEN REALMS PLAYERS GUIDE**, **PRIMAL POWER**, and **PLANE ABOVE**. Other recent designs include the card games **THREE-DRAGON ANTE**, **THREE-DRAGON ANTE: EMPEROR’S GAMBIT**, **INN-FIGHTING**, the **D&D MINIATURES** game and its first nine expansion sets, and co-design of the **DREAMBLADE** miniatures game.

In the 90s, Rob worked at Daedalus Entertainment, Chaosium, and A-Sharp on designs including **SHADOWFIST**, **FENG SHUI**, and the computer game **KING OF DRAGON PASS**. Rob blogs at robheinsoo.livejournal.com

Colin McComb...

...has been a professional game designer since 1991. He has won two Origins Awards for his work with **SECOND EDITION DUNGEONS & DRAGONS**, worked extensively on the Planescape line, and helped create the campaign setting of Birthright. He left TSR to work at Interplay/Black Isle Studios, where he helped design the cult classic computer RPG **PLANESCAPE: TORMENT**, the post-apocalyptic classic **FALLOUT 2**, and other games.

Since then, he has worked with a variety of companies including Paizo, Malhavoc Press, and Planetwide Games, creating walkthroughs, mission scripts, story design, and more. He recently advised Wayne State University on establishing a game/interactive media. He now teaches game design at a local college in Michigan. He is an independent game developer and co-owner of 3lb Games (<http://www.3lbgames.com>), where he creates mobile applications for kids. He’s currently at work on a strategy game for the iPad.

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