

सदृश presents

July 2009

Issue 3



OUT OF CHARACTER

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Cover illustration by Victoria Nichols

BUCKETS OF DICE

Will Howard

So a couple of weeks ago we had Buckets of Dice, our annual roleplaying convention. I didn't get to all of the sessions, and I was assisting with the running of the LARP and the Grand Strat, but from what I saw everyone had fun, so I'm ready to declare it all a success.

The Friday kicked off with the traditional LARP, this year Southern Seas, written and run by Naomi. The ship sadly, did not make it to the hopeful new shores of Oceania, being sunk by a combination of vicious Kraken attack, and an explosion in the powder stores. The Cannibal chef was released from the brig, and ensured that the surviving crew members were well fed on their escape boat. All in all, the voyage suffered a doomed fate.

Saturday saw tabletop gaming, as is the usual. Myself, I played in Warboss Wilson's Waagh, which netted it's GM Craig yet another best GM prize. The blend of LARP, and generic silliness led to a lot of screaming, and I greatly enjoyed running at a skirmish line formed from a few fencers, who had wandered upstairs out of a vague sense of curiosity, and I'm pretty sure weren't expecting to be charged by a pack of screaming roleplayers.

This, and a game of Zombie Cinema that Hamish convened (it being one of the odd indie games that can't really be said to be run) were the only games I was actually in. Although I did enjoy poking at the club's shiny new copy of Agricola (very good, though not for the faint hearted, takes 3-4 hours for the first play through, and can be a little bit overwhelming to new people).

Saturday night was the Grand Strat, as is Buckets tradition. This year it was run by Dillion Burke, who has written and run many of our grand strategies before. Survivor Dark Lord was from my perspective a bit of a mess, but there were costumes, and I'm told that from the player feedback forms, everyone had a fair amount of fun. Dillion is as always interested in any feedback at: <http://vizi.livejournal.com/195521.html>, where his synopsis of the event is at.

All in all, it was a weirdly stressful buckets for me, but I got the sense that people were having fun, which makes it worthwhile. At present we're entering into negotiations and should have a Buckets venue set within a month, so we can actually promote at Kapcon and all the other roleplaying clubs in the country for next year's event.

Facing page: photos from Buckets of Dice 2009.

Credit: Robert Urquhart and Matt LAST NAME HERE



GAMEATHON

Robert Urquhart

The date of the Big Night In has been changed by the organisers. The telethon, and therefore the Gameathon is now Sat 8th - Sun 9th of August.

What:

Gameathon is a project to raise money for the "Big Night In" - a telethon which will be fund raising for the KidsCan Charitable Trust. As the name suggests the idea is to get a whole lot of people to play games and contribute money to the cause, not necessarily in that order.

I'm hosting a board gaming Gameathon to to raise money for the Big Night In. The house will be open from Saturday noon until people leave on Sunday. I don't expect games to run all night but crash space will be available. If you have even a spare hour please stop by.

When:

Starting: 2009-08-08, the afternoon of Saturday the 8th of August 2009

Ending: 2009-08-09, the afternoon of Sunday the 9th of August 2009

Where:

Currently one event is planned to be run on-the-night in Christchurch. See the Gameathon website for address and details. More events are welcome.

Location: Christchurch, 16 Gladson Avenue

Contacts: Robert (marsden.marsden@gmail.com) 942 1585

Cost:

Donations will be in the form of a gold coin or equivalent per game played in.

See Also:

The Big Night In: <http://www.bignightin.co.nz>

Gameathon website: <http://gameathon.ning.com>

THE BUILDING OF KOBOLD KEEP

Robert Urquhart

This article is intended to outline the thought processes involved in developing and running the Kobold Keep scenario which ran at this years SAGA one-offs. I hope other GMs and potential GMs may find them useful. Feel free to steal any and all ideas presented here for your own games.

Objectives

For the one-offs I wanted to run an introductory adventure in the 'D&D style', including character generation. This implied:

- a short dungeon crawl with opportunities for roleplay, negotiation and thinking your way out of encounters
- a very simple system, especially for character generation. For the system I selected Microlite20 - as an analogue to both D&D3.x and the older basic D&D of my youth.
- 3 stats (generated using 4d6 drop the lowest),
- 4 skills,
- the traditional races and classes
- a HP mechanic and magic system which gives the PCs better survivability and more options than other versions. It was important that someone (a novice gamer) who had chosen to play a spellcaster could not quickly exhaust their characters options and be left with nothing obvious to do.

To serve as the skeleton of the scenario I selected the introductory adventure from the old D&D red-book DMs guide. This was

- partly for nostalgia,
- because it was designed with a beginning group in mind so a lot of the heavy lifting was done including
 - maps
 - room descriptions
 - a variety of classic monsters - kobolds, harpies, giant rats/bats, a carrion crawler and an evil wizard
- partly because it is sufficiently familiar to me that it could still be run even if the notes were misplaced

Encouraging Role Playing

One goal was to support from the start the concept of a character as someone with personality and motivations beyond numbers on the character sheet. To this end:

- the scenario blurb included several possible motivations for players to latch onto:
 - exploring the keep as a local rite of passage
 - treasure hunting
 - keep the area free of dangerous humanoids and beasts
 - bounty on Bargle/revenge on Bargle (the evil wizard rumoured to be hiding out there)
- after character generation play started with a quick round of character introductions including appearance and motivation. As DM I watched this closely for hooks I could use for later - for example providing extra information on a scene based on a character's background or playing up NPC reactions to particular PCs based on the characteristics described at this point
- the system was deliberately simple and flexible so as not to get in the way of good player ideas and the DM's ability to respond to them.

Fleshing out the adventure

To provide more than a hack-n-slash dungeon crawl (fun sometimes, but not the experience I wanted to deliver) the factions in the dungeon needed to be expanded and their relationships to each other and the Keep defined. Here is what I wound up with...

The Kobolds

Kobolds in this scenario are little dog-headed humanoids, a bit like fox terriers. They are bold in packs but typically fairly cowardly when outnumbered except for their leaders who are more aggressive. They speak in a yappy fashion, with a tendency to emit involuntary barks when under pressure. As a bonus, most of them can't count well enough to give an accurate idea of tribe numbers.

The kobold guards at the gate are the first intelligent opponents the PCs meet and the first using potentially deadly force. One or more are also likely to be captured and interrogated as they try and flee once the battle is going against them. Rather than waste time as the PCs dug for every possible bit of information I decided that the kobold tribe are recent arrivals looking for a new lair and these guards haven't been very far inside yet. They know to turn left at the entry hall to get to the lair, and that there is a cellar level where the main tribe has taken up residence.

From this the following relationships were determined:

- the kobold tribe have only explored and claimed part of the cellars and haven't yet encountered Bargle or the harpies
- although I did include a room where a kobold scouting party had encountered some of Bargle's zombie guards and nearby the remaining scouts who had fled and would rather talk than fight
- if a kobold is able to return to the tribe with stories of the PC's might other kobolds will be inclined to negotiate first
- the kobolds don't yet have a territorial attachment to the lair and could be intimidated into leaving or paying the PCs to leave them alone

The Harpies

A pair of harpies have set up in the dining hall where the chimney provides access to the upper level. They view themselves as 'Queens' of the dungeon where they have a regular food supply or tribute from whatever humanoids happen to be in residence at the time. They do not ever venture to the cellar level themselves.

This is an encounter designed to allow role-play by charmed characters protecting the harpies and encourage those who have made their saves to come up with imaginative ways to snap their friends out of it (in play casting Create Water above one character worked well). It also came with the possibility of eliminating the entire party with enough failed saves. To avoid this I decided that the harpies would prefer to send their freshly charmed subjects out to gather more information on the new arrivals to the dungeon (and maybe bring back a plump tasty kobold) rather than devour them all immediately.

The following relationships and motivations were determined:

- The harpies are aware that kobolds have moved in but there hasn't been any direct contact yet
- Bargle and the harpies have come to a non-aggression arrangement as his zombie bodyguards, unaffected by the harpies song, let him negotiate from a position of strength. They don't know why he came to the dungeon and would be very happy to see him gone
- If hard pressed and unable to flee they would bargain for their lives. Likewise they could be persuaded to let the PCs go in exchange for treasure and flattery

Bargle the Infamous (Evil Wizard)

The original adventure suggests Bargle be placed on the third level of the dungeon (map not supplied). There is no way the PCs would get that far in the one-off timeframe so instead Bargle is trying to get to the blocked-off third level of the dungeon and has taken over some of the upper and cellar levels as his base - conveniently on the opposite side of the Keep to the kobolds. He hasn't bothered exploring any more of the dungeon than he really needed to - he has an old map of the place.

Relationships and motivations:

- Where would an evil wizard be if he had to do everything himself? I bulked out Bargle's faction with more classic monsters
 - some zombies (supplied by his sponsor for the expedition, some still in their crates along with other supplies like digging tools). Some of these can be encountered as guards, in which case they attack, and some digging out a collapsed stairwell, in which case they ignore the PCs unless attacked

a couple of goblin minions, because sometimes you need eyes with a brain behind them, to run and tell you that your guards are being eliminated

- Bargle isn't really interested in any of the other inhabitants of the dungeon. Anyone who might report his presence to the town or getting between him and the treasure is to be blasted and eliminated, charmed and made use of, or paid off in that order of preference
- He has made a deal with the harpies for information and should he encounter the kobolds will simply fireball a few of them and make it clear the rest are to stay in their corner of the cellars

Unintelligent (unaligned) Monsters

The original adventure comes with rats and bats. These typically serve as food and rubbish disposal for whoever is in the dungeon and don't attack the PCs unless their nests are disturbed. If the PCs don't search a room full of piles of rubbish they might never notice the rats hiding there.

I added some nests of monstrous spiders in the cellars. These typically have a mutual predator/prey relationship with whatever humanoids are present.

- The kobolds have discovered one nest and wisely decided to avoid it for now, but they will happily suggest adventurers explore in that direction
- Bargle has cleared out one nest with a fireball which may provide alert PCs some clue as to his abilities

The carrion crawler which is the first encounter in the adventure also required special attention. Although it inflicts no actual damage it's many by-the-book attacks mean that a run of bad saves can easily take out the entire party at this early stage. To counter this I decreed that it only got one attack per character in reach and also reduced the duration of the paralysis (sometimes using dramatic licence) to enable fallen PCs to recover and get back into the fight.

(Some people might take offence at this last technique, but it must be remembered that the adventure is being run to give an exciting gaming experience to beginning players, and that doesn't happen if someone spends the entirety of the first fight unable to contribute. This is a defining case for drama trumping rules.)

Inanimate challenges

It wouldn't be a D&D dungeon without some inanimate traps. The dungeon comes with some neat rotating statues (which I included a workshop for building to use up an empty room in the cellar) and some frankly silly magical traps which I discarded in favour of some more 'rogue friendly' installations.

From a dungeon design perspective the zombies-in-boxes also counts as a trap, which is triggered when the PCs start opening these suspiciously recent crates.

The value of playtesting

When running an adventure for beginning players the DM needs to be sufficiently familiar with the system and the scenario to concentrate on providing a good experience. Even for someone with years of designing and improvising scenarios a playtest or two will show up things which can be done better.

Kobold Keep wasn't extensively playtested, but improvements were able to be made. Another thing about playtesting, planning to do so means you have to start working on your scenario that much earlier which greatly improves the chance that it will be written up properly in time to be run, which provides more time for potential issues to become obvious.

You don't have to exhaust the possibilities

It's actually unlikely that a group will defeat the harpies, expel the kobolds, clear out the spider nests and defeat Bargle (and not necessarily in that order) in the 3-ish hours of play allowed by a one-off (plus half an hour of character creation). Two of the above seems to be most common before the PCs have enough loot and few enough resources that they decide to call it a day or time runs out.

This doesn't matter - the aim is firstly that everyone has fun, secondly that a new player walks away with an understanding of just what it is we do with character sheets and funny shaped dice.

Happy gaming!

GAMING ETIQUETTE

Robert Urquhart

This article continues from Robert's article in Issues 1 and 2 of Out of Character.

If you are new to this gaming thing you will soon discover that there are certain negative stereotypes, which exist within gaming circles. Experienced gamers will not only know the stereotypes, but probably know someone who fits each one. These tips are intended to provide a guide to some common behaviours which are generally appreciated (or not) around a role playing group. For the most part they apply equally to players and GMs.

Tip #7: Player/Character information - know the difference

Often as a player you may have information that your character will not - what happened to the other half of the party after the group got split up (because you were paying attention as they played through it), that Count Borens is really a spy (because the GM mentioned it out of game), or the special abilities of an opponent (because you've read the book). Keeping this from influencing your character's actions can be difficult but it is generally bad form to blatantly use information that your character could not have. The same applies to real-world skills (for example scientific knowledge) which you have but your character does not.

Tip #8: Have consideration for others

Games can get loud. If there are other games or activities nearby it is polite to try and keep the noise to a reasonable level, otherwise you risk becoming a distraction.

Leave the venue tidy. The aftermath of a game can resemble a disaster area with food wrappings, drink bottles and screwed up papers scattered around. It's generally unfair to expect the host of the game to tidy up everyone else's mess and if you are playing at a semi-public venue it is even more important not to leave rubbish behind lest you lose the use of the area.

ORIGINS 2009

THE OFFICIAL SAGA REPORT

Jan-Yves Ruzicka

Please understand that I took no pleasure in attending Origins. I did it just to let you know what it was like. OK, that paragraph was an out and out lie. I knew Rose and I would be heading to America this year, and when I worked out we'd be in around the same region as Origins when it was occurring - well, we couldn't pass up an opportunity like that, could we?

First step was booking the event itself. The hardest step in registration was sorting out which events to go to - there were literally thousands (the website lists 4 300), including board games, role-playing games, wargames, LARPs, seminars, workshops, tournaments, beta-tests...I ended up registering for very few, being dwarfed by the sheer scale of the thing.

Of course, there's a bit of a difference in scale between what we do in New Zealand and what I was going to. Buckets of Dice 2009 got approximately 50 attendees. Twenty events! A whole month's worth of gaming in one weekend! So I was quite shocked when we drove into Columbus, Ohio, to the sight of banners on the lamp posts proclaiming the event. Our hotel was packed with attendees. Entering the convention centre, I was hit with the sound of 10 000 geeks going about their geeky business.

The first afternoon was spent just wandering around, getting a hold of the scale of the event. The halls had plenty of shiny stuff to gawk at - Battletech pods, giant Settlers of Catan, boffer weapon battles, various volunteers in their respective "uniforms", game auctions...and of course, the dealer's room.

Being the second-largest convention in America, Origins attracts a lot of attention from big-name game manufacturers. Companies like Mayfair, Steve Jackson Games, and Rio Grande all have their stalls there, trying to tempt the passer-by into purchasing their latest products. There were also a number of dice companies, leatherworkers, and the usual stalls displaying produce far too expensive for a student from New Zealand to afford.

I didn't spend all the convention drooling over the dealer's room. I had to spend some time playing games, either with new friends in the Board Room, or mentored by one of the many helpful groups who were organising and teaching board games. In fact, there were so many board gaming events happening that I didn't even get a chance to play any RPGs the entire time I was there, despite my intentions at the start of the con. The closest I came to roleplaying was probably the late-night Werewolf games organised by Looney Labs, which ran from 10pm until 2am.

Overall, the event was awe-inspiring. It's very easy to forget exactly how many gamers live on this planet, but the sheer scale and success of Origins is a good way of reminding yourself that yes, there are a lot of us these days. If you ever get the chance, I highly recommend spending a week of your time to go. You'll make new friends, you'll play new games, and it'll make you realise how cool it is to be a gamer sometimes.

Facing page: photos from Origins 2009

Credit: Jan-Yves Ruzicka



SUBMISSIONS

I'm seeking submissions for the next issue of OOC. E-mail submissions to publications@saga.org.nz

I am particularly interested in:

- articles about current campaigns
- cartoons
- reviews of new products

WEBSITE

SAGA's website has had a make-over. The old granite block has gone, replaced with a burst clean, fresh, web-2.0y goodness. Go visit it at www.saga.org.nz. Sign up and add your campaign, or comment on our latest events. The only thing limiting you is your imagination, and our bandwidth cap.

COMICS COMPULSION

Check out their wide variety of products: these include comics, role playing games, war games and board games.

Location: 181 Manchester Street

Website: www.comicscompulsion.co.nz

E-mail: comics@xtra.co.nz

Remember, Comics offers a 5% discount to all SAGA members. Just present your membership card.

BOARD GAMING FUNDRAISER

When: Friday 14th of August

Time: 3-8pm

Where: LCR - UCSA

Cost: Gold coin donation

What: an afternoon of board games to play the new board games. This should also be plenty of time to complete some of the longer games we have, such as Talisman and Arkham Horror.