BALANCING ACT

Why Rules and Role-Playing Don't Mix
by Mike Lewis

Playing characters with a strong emphasis on developing a three-dimensional identity is much lauded amongst 'serious' role-players. The use of realistic, long and complex rules is also considered the height of real role-playing. This attitude is strange since one directly opposes the other – role-playing is hampered by realistic rules and realistic rules leave very little room for role-playing to develop. Thus, it is hardly surprising that many people find it difficult to achieve a true and satisfying atmosphere in a game. To put this problem quite simply, the rules get in the way.

Consider the situation in a typical role-playing game. An event has just occurred which needs some form of adjudication, the rules are brought out, consulted with the correct air of reverence, dice are rolled and the outcome of the decision announced. Yet the moment this happens the atmosphere which has been carefully built up during that session, and which derives from the role-playing aspect of the game, is destroyed. The

moment a player is asked to roll a die or the GM pauses to consult the rulebook, the players are taken from their fantasy world and thrust rudely back into the real world. At this point, the whole game experience created by the interaction between GM and players ceases, and the game becomes just that – an excercise using bits of paper, dice and metal figures.

The more realism and accuracy a rules system strives to create, the more complex and detailed the rules become, the harder it is for the GM to remember all the necessary rules, and the greater the rules system intrudes into the game. One possible solution is to reduce the game system to something on the level of *Tunnels & Trolls,* or *Fighting Fantasy* – simple rules which are easily remembered and quick to play. Is *T&T* a better system than, say, *Chivalry & Sorcery*? No, they are both very unrealistic, as they both attempt to quantify human characteristics and abilities in terms of dice rolls.

Surely, the best method of

gaming then, is to have no rules system. Nothing would interfere with the players' enjoyment of the game and the GM would be saved a lot of time and trouble (not to mention money!) over the rules. The GM makes decisions based on a 'free kriegspiel' system – basing the outcome of any action upon his judgement of an appropriate result and his world view – an ideal solution, easy to adjudicate, with no arguments over the 'rules' and with everybody happy.

Unfortunately, this 'ideal' system (in all but a few exceptional cases) would prove to be impossible to put into practice, simply because of the weight of responsibility it placed on the Game Masters' shoulders, and the feelings of suspicion which are bound to arise. How can the players trust all the GM's decisions? How can they be sure that the GM is unbiased and that he will rule equally in all cases? Would you like to face an angry player who demands to know why his character has just died – all he did was to fall

off a cliff! When Harry's character did that last week, he lived through it. How do you explain to him that you've since realised your last decision was wrong, and that your world view has now changed? Or that you made a mistake last time – without your players losing faith in you GMing abilities? Then there are the 'rules lawyers' – the players who insist on quoting you chapter and verse verbatim from the rulebook. 'You can't do that! It says on page 234, paragraph 6, under Exceptions that . . . ' Under a 'free kriegspiel' system they would question every decision: these players would be the death of most GMs!

There has to be a mid-point, however, somewhere between the two extreme approaches, which offers a chance for enhanced role-playing, yet includes enough hard-and-fast rules to keep the average player happy. This intermediate state can be achieved in any game, under any games system, simply by experimenting a little, and altering the way in which rules

decisions and the players' actions are handled. Here are a few suggestions:

1. If there is a very high chance of character success in a given situation, allow that successful action to take place without a die roll. This may sound like heresy – what are die rolls and rules for, if not to limit the characters from doing things? I am not suggesting that you should allow all characters with more than a 50% chance an instant success, that would bias things far too heavily in the players' favour; just if the situation is a mundane and ordinary one which only slows down the game (eg looking for firewood, attempting to light a cigarette, etc).

It is not advisable to use this option when the success or failure of an action is particularly important to the campaign, or the character concerned. A side effect of this is that it does give player characters a slightly better chance of survival – not always a bad thing!

2. If you are unable to remember a rule during the middle of a game which is flowing particularly well, and is building up a good atmosphere, do not break the mood by checking up on the rules. Instead, trust in your own judgement, taking into account all the factors of the situation and your own knowledge and experience of your campaign. Once you have GMed even just a few sessions, you pick up an instinctive feel for the game and rules system, which will allow you to make snap decisions in a realistic fashion.

Note, however, that this should not be done when a player character is in danger of dying, as the player will tend to harbour ill feelings if it turns out later that your judgement was wrong! Although this idea does sound a little like cheating, or even just sheer laziness, on the GM's part, it isn't; the rules are not that important a part of the game that they cannot be ignored once in a while. Strict rules playing belongs in games like *Monopoly,* not in the free and open-ended experience that forms a role-playing game.

3. Try not to rely too heavily on dice and random encounter tables for your encounters during an adventure. While a random encounter can liven up a flagging games session – there being nothing better than a quick fight to arouse people's interests – you can

get too much of a good thing! If the rules say you should roll for encounters once every three turns, try not to take them too literally. Several times I've seen parties of adventurers surrounded by wandering monsters who seem to swarm in from every direction. All this type of constant encounter really achieves is to distract the players from their current task in the game, to slow the game down and to eventually create a very muddled and unstructured campaign.

I have always found it better to prepare a set of pre-planned encounters, and to introduce these at appropriate points in the course of play. This also enables you to deliberately distract the players from the main part of your campaign if you have a strong reason to delay them. Random encounters then become sub-plots, which can introduce characters to new and important NPCs, reward them with items they will need in their main quest, or split the party up and set them against each other. If used carefully and with some consideration, random encounters can add much more to an on-going campaign than the mere thrill of a quick fight with a wandering monster.

4. React to your players. Role-playing is a two-way exchange; interaction on several levels is essential between the players and the GM. Do not be afraid to alter the scenario you are running in response to some player action. If the adjustment produces a better game, and a more satisfying and enjoyable outcome for the players, then it is worth doing – even if it means radically altering your plot. In the same way that rules can be ignored, amended or even rewritten, so commercial scenarios can be altered.

Rather than following a scenario plot exactly, always be on the look-out for tie-ins between the scenario and your own group of player characters. If you are playing a game such as *AD&D* which uses character classes, then the types of character in the player party are going to have a major effect on the scenario's outcome. Some scenarios may have a vital clue in them, or an essential piece of equipment, which can only be reached by someone with the skills of a thief. So, any party without a thief present is going to have problems in playing through the scenario, or is going to miss out on a lot of the action and enjoyment to

be gained from it. Adapt the scenario ideas, content and difficulty to match your party. It isn't just character powers that are important, also objects, religions and any phobia they may have. It is also important to be able to adapt the scenario in mid-game – if the players think of a clever and ingenious way through a trap or 'dead-end' you must be able to think on your feet and react. Spontaneity is a vital part of all good role-playing.

5. In even a small group of players, many GMs adopt the idea of each player taking an action in turn, so that each member of the group gets to do something in the game. This is not a bad idea, groups can easily be dominated by one or two loud and vociferous players who will tend to get an unfair share of the action. Yet, the very concept of a fixed turn for each player goes against the goals that an FRP game is trying to achieve – that of an intricate and detailed narrative, a 'living novel' as some have called it. Allotting a discreet action to each of the player characters in order reduces the game flow to that of a boardgame. Each player can make a move, roll the dice and then they sit around until it is their turn to 'go' next. You simply cannot create a satisfactory, flowing role-playing atmosphere within such artificial constraints.

The answer is to let the game progress naturally, with each player only taking an action when they have to, and when it is realistic for them to do so within the game. This can be extremely difficult for a GM to achieve without a central player character dominating all the action and players with, perhaps, less powerful characters being left out. No-one likes sitting around watching someone else have all the fun and make all the decisions. In order for this system to work effectively, producing a smooth flowing game without discreet intervals of time, and yet to involve all the players present, or to make them feel they are involved, takes a lot of practice and puts a lot of pressure on the GM. You must be aware of all your players at once and try to divide your time between them equally. If a player is just sitting there and looks as though they are feeling left out, make them join in. Use an NPC to drag them into the game, to force them to make a decision.

If the players are no longer

just sitting around the table waiting for their next turn, idly playing with dice, spilling beer cans, etc, but are actively involved in the game all the time, because they can never be sure when they have to make a decision, the game flows better and creates a greater sense of atmosphere.

The above points are only a few suggestions which arise from my own experience of running games. There are many more ways of removing the rules from the game, and creating a more realistic role-playing feeling. One possible idea is to have a form of 'secondary GM' who would be responsible for the NPCs within the game and it would be he or she that role-played them rather than the GM. This would take a fair amount of work off the GM's shoulders in that he no longer has to concentrate on role-playing his NPCs, but can concentrate on the game's flow and the players' actions. While the NPCs could be improved by having a good role-player devote all of their attention to the various roles required, adding depth and feeling to what are often little more than names, this would require a lot of work between the GM and his 'NPC master', as they would both have to work closely together to keep the campaign flowing realistically without inconsistencies between their two approaches. Yet it would be a great challenge to most role-players to play the parts of all those characters, and I feel it would definitely benefit a large group by freeing the GM from a lot of unnecessary work.

I have actually run games of my campaign Gilkemmen in a totally 'free kriegspiel' fashion, the most notable being a run at *Stabcon IV* a couple of years ago. It has proven to be successful, the major problem being character/player identity. The players seemed to find it hard to relate to just a character description of their characters, without the usual characteristics and other stats. Hit points appear to be a major problem area; few players like being told that their character is 'feeling weak' without them knowing exactly how many hit points they have left. It's a survival instinct I suppose!

Try to experiment with your own rules system. If you avoid slavishly following rules and the dictates of others then you'll find your games much more enjoyable and fulfilling. You'll even find them more fun – which is why we play the things, isn't it? □