

SEAN: Those are three questions I have never explicitly asked when joining a particular group or approaching a game. I do think I have asked 'accepted' and 'expected' in round-about ways, but never quite so to the point. I can think of several times when asking the question would have benefitted me as a player. I grok the idea that Possible is or should be tempered by accepted / expected if we are using the three terms together. Saying, and I have said this myself, anything is possible really is nonsense. Everything is not possible because there are too many variables that have to be satisfied. And you could not create constraints in such a madhouse without having to stomp hard on peoples' clever ideas. At the same time, diagramming actions based on the three criteria would lean towards narrowing options down to actions that are too limited to satisfy play or the player. But perhaps that is the point? Finding a sweet spot of play possibility? I am not sure that it would work that way, instead creating a very narrow set of possible actions.

ME: That seems pessimistic to me. If we think of axes (spectra) for routes of action, rather than isolated do-this units, then even two axes permits a wide range of responses and outcomes, not necessarily predicted or dictated.

Also, just in case, I'm not talking about explicit questions or discussions among an actual group of persons. I suspect that doing that wouldn't get anywhere. How these concepts are communicated and known is a very good thing to contemplate, but I have no answer for it now.

HELMA: What is accepted? what is expected? what is possible? I immediately added: at this table – in this game? I don't think I ever asked those questions aloud, and not even asked myself in so pointed a fashion. I do ask myself similar questions whenever I meet new people at the table. So far, I never have come to a table with a well established group as a newbie. I have played games that the others around the table knew by heart while I had not known about them before reading the book. In those cases I trust the “veterans” to tell me of if I try the unacceptable, unexpected or impossible – whether it be written in the book or a tradition grown during time – and I'm willing to accept their verdict in the situation. I might voice my opinion after the session or base my like/dislike of the game in question on it. I try my utmost to adjust and so far have finished the games I started to play, for the sake of the people that are in the game with me. Recently I have learned that that may come at to high a price, so maybe I'll have to adjust there, and maybe asking those questions or similar ones before play should be as natural as asking: what kind of safety tools do you use (something I try to find out if I think a game might make me wish I know that). I generally tend to try to figure out things on my own, partly because I don't want to slow down the more experienced ones more than absolutely necessary. and to hope that others will tell me if I accidentally have run them over in any way. So far, people still seem okay playing with me. I do know that I've been more than lucky to come into roleplaying the way I did and to immediately find a whole community that matches my interests and intentions when it comes to role playing in such a good way. So maybe I just did not have the need to ask?

ME: I think these questions and terms have provided a very good way to welcome new people and to introduce new games at Spelens Hus.

LOVE: I think I grasp what you are saying about “the possible”. It’s non-scariness and maybe even non-issue-ness if and when the other two questions and answers are understood by the group.

Some questions. I’ve just started to read Vampire 5th edition, the first step in preparation for starting a game of it with my partner, her sister, and maybe a friend of her sister. I have never played Vampire or any Vampire-adjacent game, my partner did. It was about 15 years ago (second edition): fond memories, and she haven’t played much role-playing games since then. Her sister have never played a role-playing game before, and she is super jazzed to finally do it. Are you saying that it can be fruitful to first ask those three questions \*to\* the book while reading and preparing, to make sense of how play will work for us? I haven’t actually grasped what is Expected playing this game yet (it’s not “the Crawl”), and I can see that the questions can be helpful for me. And do you then propose that I and/or my partner either presents or discusses the three questions and their answers to the group before play?

RON: I am not yet entirely sure about effective practices. I know that the questions should be answered in terms of each person's understanding about what to do, but I don't know whether they should be answered in some abstract or contractual form. I tend to dislike discursive and analytical setups before play and I can't think of a single instance in which it was a good idea. I know that even a very few minutes of playing with people can clearly orient them about the three concepts ... or fail to do so, leading to a limping and difficult-to-tolerate context. I also know there are certain habits of thought that people bring with them which completely wall off the orientation.

I like what you said about asking the questions to the book. I am pretty sure that's what I do. I'm also pretty sure that I read RPG texts with a certain caution or awareness that their answers may be highly implicit and opaque to certain kinds of reading. I'm talking about believing or desiring the RPG text to be fully explanatory so that any and all possible play is mapped or comprehensible the reader. I'm also talking about believing or desiring it to be a technical user-manual which will flip to exactly the right thing to say or do at any imaginable moment of play. Both of these are, I think, likely to fail almost by definition.

JESSE: I think it is worth considering the "of whom" and "by whom" (and maybe even "over what") to each of these questions. In the video it sounds like the couple was talking about their own input into the game via their actions: "What is accepted/expected/possible of us, by the group, over our character's actions?" That formulation is both very reasonable and as you say very enlightening. I'm reminded of an on going discussion with a teacher friend of mine who is very much one of those "I just want people to make up cool stuff, nearly anything goes!" types people. In particular, he does a lot of stuff with children (I think 7-12) and so I know that he's very focused on first establishing that "saying literally anything is accepted and welcome here without judgment" as kind of an important first step. However, I keep pressing him on if he has any plans to teach "color palette" further down the line. That eventually, "I pull out my ray gun" might not be an acceptable thing to say in the mist shrouded forest of the spider queen. And I can tell he kind of gets conflicted. On the one hand he kind of gets it. On the other he kind of feels that only jerks would deny you YOUR kind of fun. That is, if you felt the need to say "I pull out my ray gun" it was obviously important to YOU and should probably BE accepted, otherwise you would have said something else. If you start shifting the "of whom", "by whom", "over what" around a bit you get all kinds of interesting and troublesome intersections. I've certainly seen people argue "what is possible" as a method of trying to dodge constraints of situation or system. How about this one: "A really cool idea should never fail" which is certainly an expectation, but of outcome or even system. It's similar to, "This should be the moment when my brother finally has had enough of my shit." which might be an expectation of what the GM should feed you next dramatically. Those are my thoughts.

ME: Those are a lot of different thoughts, so I think I'll focus on one or two. As I see it, shifting "of whom" "by whom" "over what" around is a wonderful phenomenon and not problematic at all. It may not always be successful, much in the same way that making music together isn't guaranteed. As you and I have discussed for a long time, we aren't talking about some interactive menu which pumps out story like a sausage. I've been thinking about the "what is possible" issue for a while too, especially given my long history with first-generation Champions and my recent intense experience with it for Champions Now. It's a big topic and leads me into some territory which is all too familiar to some of you concerning the nearly-complete disconnect between comics creators and comics fans. The latter are very concerned with what is and isn't possible ... the former are not. But in terms of the conversation that prompted this post, we should distinguish between understanding what rules-in-application may actually accomplish - which is probably better understood as "accepted" - and what some ineffable virtual unspace is or isn't like.

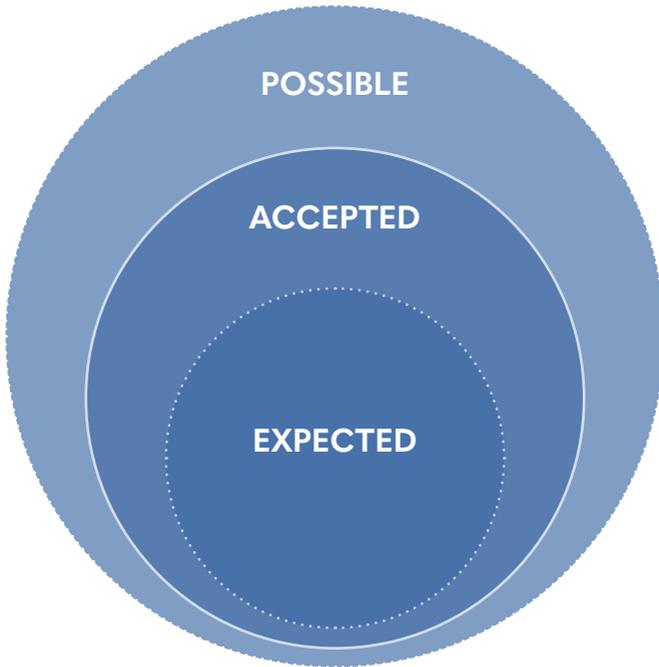
ROSS: I really like this formulation for orienting people towards a game / play, and I'm currently thinking about how to use it to shape introducing new players to roleplaying via 5e. Obviously this exact wording isn't always going to be the best fit, but the general thrust captures something that seems really useful. I'm interested in the bit where you provisionally connect the in game reward cycle to the what's expected? question, while appreciating why it is provisional. It seems like this is a good place to start thinking about how people can be equipped / equip themselves to answer these questions about a play context they find themselves in, where just asking the other players might, in some instances, not be very productive.

ME: Agreed in full.

JOHN: Outsiders' views of role-playing can be so insightful! We long-time players approach the activity with so many assumptions that we aren't even aware of anymore. There's the truism that your typical experienced D&D player's new character concept is always a gruff loner whose parents died when they were young, and is wandering the world looking for treasure; whereas the new player's character concept is something like: a noble whose child was just kidnapped by their half-cousin who wants the throne for themselves! The newcomer's concept is charged with backstory and situation and potential energy! Why don't experienced players do this? Because of the unspoken assumption (in D&D and in many RPGs) that the GM will supply the backstory and the situation, and that the player may not interfere with those aspects in any way. The player's only job is to present a character ex nihilo that could go adventuring in any situation -- and that's why experienced players offer up such boring sanitized character concepts. What's possible? Certainly in D&D it's possible for players to come up with very loaded character concepts that drive play. But what's expected? That the DM will provide the backstory and starting situation (if not the actual plot) in toto for others to play within. Wouldn't it be great if we could capture and preserve new players' wide-open concepts of what RPGs can be; rather than what I am often doing, the opposite, which is trying to get seasoned D&D players to stop waiting for me to indicate what they're "supposed to" be doing, and to just do something, anything, please, there's no wrong answer, just do something and the game will support you I promise!

LORENZO (see following pages)

LORENZO (follow-up): I think one thing the three questions strongly underline is that the answers need to be evaluated per game. If we try to generalize we risk losing the usefulness of asking those questions. Think of what is expected in, say, BECMI vs Legendary Lives vs Circle of Hands vs Dogs in the Vineyard just at the character creation stage. The timing at which different players contribute information and the quality of those informations and the requirements to listen to each other and the usage of that information is always different. It's the biggest weakness in my previous analysis: I still think the overlapping of possible and acceptable has value especially in terms of design, but the expected is too varied to categorize.



To be completely honest, I feel like my own mental process on how those words/questions are related and interact with each other is different, probably in a more schematic, less interesting way.

“Possible” being the largest category: if you cannot do that, it can’t be expected or accepted. I think my reading of “possible” stops at the idea of “trying” - whether you succeed or not, it was possible at some point, even if just theoretically. In this sense, the “possible” is the province of the author/game designer: it can be rules or it can be color or it can be backdrop elements, but the stage where someone sits and says “this is what you do in this game, and by association, this is what you don’t” is where “possible” gets defined.

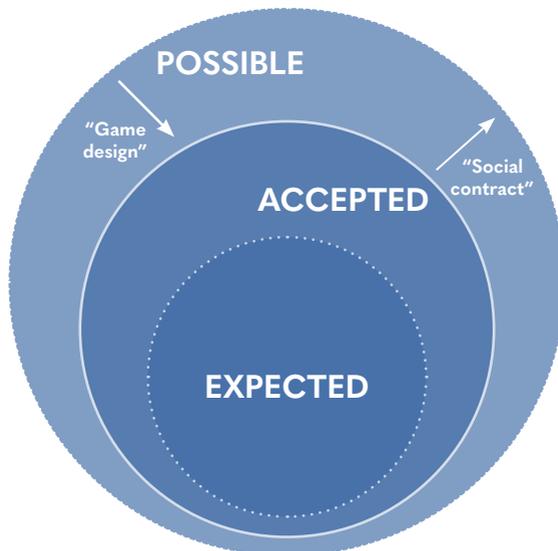
“Accepted” feels like it’s about the social contract, at this specific table or in this specific situation. It’s easy to mention x-cards or lines and veils but I feel it’s a broader topic. Within all the things that are possible in this game, this is what we accept, not necessarily

like, but still feel that is within anyone's right and prerogative to bring into play. Further play may alter the nature of what is accepted, and something that was accepted before may not be later on, especially if something is frowned upon or creates friction between players or between players and the rules, but there is an ideal, often implicit stage where what is acceptable is defined.

"Acceptable" should be, logically, a subset of possible (if it is not possible, then it can't happen and can't be accepted - but more on this later). If it's accepted, then it happened, so it was possible. It is possible for the rogue to use his Pickpocket ability on other players; the fact that he does may or may not be accepted.

At this point I'm tempted to say that it means that the work of the author/designer is to "shrink" the range of possibility down to as close to the Accepted subset as possible. The smaller the delta is, the smaller the range of possible but unacceptable actions become. If I know and communicate well what is possible in the game, I will create expectat... yeah, right. I think I know how this ends.

But it can be important to evaluate that this process can/should happen in the opposite direction too: a clear understanding of how the game works, what it is about and what can happen within it will lead the "accepted" subset to grow closer to the "possible" one.



So, what about “Expected”? It clearly needs to be a “smaller” or equal subset to “accepted” (you can’t expect the impossible, and you can’t expect something you won’t accept in the game).

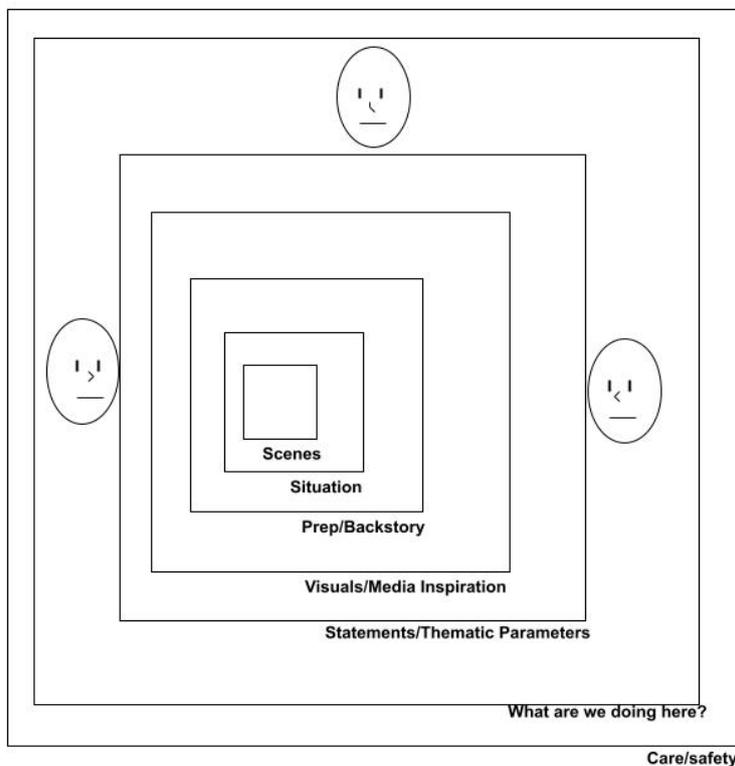
“Expected” seems to me to be what we desire to see in the game, both as the reasons we play a particular game or play a game in a particular way. It’s not a necessarily “soft” category at all (if a player doesn’t do what he is expected to do, the game may fail) and I would suggest it’s not identical for all players - this could be potentially true for the other two words too, but I think it’s more relevant here because it can be much more subtle. If I picked a cleric, am I expected to save my spells to heal others? It is definitely possible for me not to, it is probably accepted for me not to, but is it expected that I do?

The relationship between accepted and expected is interesting and it feels like once again, the game works best the closer they are to each other. Anything that is accepted but not expected could be probably described as “tolerated”, which doesn’t sound that fun.

So, my impression is that “expected” is the most important subset. That’s why it’s the smallest - as long as we don’t interpret it as social pressure or extradiegetical/dysfunctional elements (“you’re expected to obey the DM” or “you’re expected to take the story in this direction” - I’m discarding all of this stuff), then “expected” becomes the stuff we want to see at the table. It’s what we sat down to play. It’s the one that can grow and stretch the others, it starts smaller but it can expand what is accepted (and then we change the social contract or house ruling) and it can even expand what’s possible (and then we have game design at the table).

We can also imagine the expected as the biggest subset, but then we would either describe “ideal” situations were every subset is identical or dysfunctional ones where the possible or the accepted don’t match the expected (and we have a game that failed at the prep stage).

NOAH: I still need to catch up with the conversation here, so apologies if I repeat something said above or miss a resonance that I should be responding to. After our voice conversation regarding the difference between storyboarding and play, Ron, I updated my little diagram. It strikes me that I could add "the possible" to the diagram by adding a halo of potentiality emanating from each of the people in the picture. It is only strictly limited by the bounds of Safety/Lines - in other words, with these tools, someone says, "THIS will not be possible in this game," and we accept this because we care about the person's health, safety and happiness. The possible interacts with the accepted/expected in extremely complex ways (both of which I would place in the layer labeled "What are we doing here?") But I would say that this answers, for me, why I am playing THIS game with THESE people...because the possibility that they bring expands and enlivens what is accepted and expected at this table. This expansion can go so far as to redefine or deepen our understanding and commitment to this shared activity we are doing together.



ME: I like the idea that "possible" is composed of entirely different variables, i.e., it is not merely an expansion of "accepted." It must be framed as a question of whether this new parameter or whatever will be accepted, using different criteria from the other stuff we have accepted from the start.