

PATREON DISCUSSION FOR Q&A DURING SEPTEMBER 2022

SEAN

Is it reasonable to say that the origin of RPG design from 1977 onward comes out of looking at a "scenario" and thinking either, A) This system does not work for this OR B) This is utter bs, I need to make something better? I say this tongue firmly in cheek, though I suspect there is some truth to it.

- **Me:** I don't know about *all* design but certainly a lot of it. That seems to apply earlier, even immediately, regarding T&T 1e in 1975. As a contrast, and to include the Marvel Super Heroes question, and perhaps superheroes in general, I think they represent the big divergence; people who weren't starting with the presumptions or perceptions associated with D&D (*sensu lato*) as first-principles.

DAVID

Palladium fantasy was seen as a kind of poor man's D&D in my circles, with all that implies about social class -- ie: rich kids had all of the orange spine AD&D books, Greyhawk, etc. I had Palladium FRPG. I know it is not cool to say this but at the time I came across it, I definitely found Palladium more evocative than AD&D. I also felt it had a greater range of play. Details like the racial cannibalism rate or the pact rules for witches really set it apart for me. Or the prospect of changeling double or triple agents in the party. The core book by itself has plenty of interesting stuff in it. I have been listening to audiobooks of Designers & Dragons (what a slog!) and have just passed the section devoted to Palladium. There's no mention of a shoe shop and who knows if this was omitted but their first print run of anything (The Mechanoid Invasion) was subsidized by the mother of Bill Messner-Loebs (renowned comic artist and gaming buddy of Kevin Siembieda). Otherwise, the picture painted in that book is that Kevin Siembieda himself was a divisive figure as he apparently liked writing angry letters and suing people. That may have contributed to painting Palladium into a corner.

- **Me:** "Not cool" often means saying true things, in this hobby. The Palladium material may be a lot of things, even things one may disapprove of, or varying widely among inspiring and stupid, but its audacity as such is inspiring - it dares to be absurd. Jon wrote some good points about Designers & Dragons here: <https://adeptplay.com/comment/4854#comment-4854>
- **David:** Yup, I agree with Jon's points there. One could frame a drinking game around the series: take a shot when the author valorizes a company for providing support (ie: supplementation) and then take a shot when that company goes out of business. One *could* but then one would die of alcohol poisoning. Jon's comment in that post lead me to reading The Nuked Applegate for the first time, which was very enjoyable. Interestingly, I think it also shatters another myth that some people might hold to be true: that most RPG publishing is "indie" (or was at the time). Of course, the term "indie" has been stretched to mean a lot of things in the hobby (and in other mediums) but your definition in that essay nails it for me. This is probably a can of worms but if you had to ballpark it, how much RPG publishing today do you think fits this definition of indie? Palladium's different games all appeal to the perpetual 12 year old for all that entails. Even when they are trying to capitalize on a trend in the hobby, they retain such a strong sense of identity that the thing they are trying to emulate ultimately becomes subordinate to the un-self-conscious zaniness of Palladium. I don't recall ever not having fun playing their games (even for all of the flaws). But with all that, I really don't know if I could put myself back into that 12 year old mindset -- although I would certainly like to try at some point.

DAVID

Boot Hill is very interesting to me on a few levels. It really seems to be a case of taking a little skirmish war game and just adding the least amount of things to turn it into a role-playing game. I haven't looked closely at Chainmail vs OD&D but this phenomena is writ large in Boot Hill. This gets built up a little more with the modules that came out where reaction tables and other more RPG-like things are added. I am also quite interested in the play culture. I feel very lucky to have played Boot Hill at all as it was a hand-me-down from someone who hated it and most of my friends also hated the idea of playing a wild west RPG. Fantasy and super heroes were acceptable but wild west was out of the question. I played it with the one friend who indulged it, based entirely on my enthusiasm. In terms of the play culture, I also get the sense that if there weren't "anti-fantasy" people on the other side of the divide then there were some very purist wild west people playing it. I get this impression from a page in Boot Hill 3rd Edition called "Tales of Discontinuity" that basically gives people permission to mix in horror and fantasy elements while trying to not offend the purists ("don't worry, these are just alternative realities"). So that makes me wonder what these non-purists were getting up to in the many years leading up to the publication of Boot Hill 3rd Edition. I am fascinated both in the fictional content but also in the little house rules that were being developed to accommodate Boot Hill with werewolves or whatever else. If anybody has any perspective or stories about this, I'd love to hear about it. Or anything about Boot Hill in general...

- **Me:** Agreed on all counts. I remember being very distracted by the "ooh! put magic in here too!" parts of the copy I had, and in retrospect I wish I'd paid more attention to anything that might have indicated how to play it as a western as such. But just as you say, what I recall is pretty much just how to run a stand-and-draw gunfight.
- **Jesse:** I have a pdf of Boot Hill that is from 1979 and calls itself Second Edition. The rules do focus on gunfights but there is a lot of stuff about campaign play. It's very clear that players don't have to function as a party or "posse". Some players might be bandits, some might be lawmen, others might just be townfolk trying not to get caught in the crossfire. The framework feels a little bit like Diplomacy. The referee is meant to adjudicate and convey secret "off screen" events and information between players until someone does something violent. The bandit players decide to team up and rob the bank. The lawman player manages to convince the town players to go out and track down one particular bandit. Or whatever. THEN you break out the dice and maps and play that scenario with the referee clarifying win conditions for everyone.
- **Me:** We should totally play this.
- **Pedro:** I was barely aware of Boothill as a historical milestone, but recently I found this article about it and I think it makes an interesting point about the side effects of unabashedly deadly combat: <https://www.chocolatehammer.org/?p=5773> (Also, I should mention because it was cited at the top of Luke Gearing's "Violence" system <https://lukegearing.blot.im/violence>)
- **David:** I encountered that chocolatehammer blog post before and I really love it. This is a scary thought: in Boot Hill there is a 60% chance that a starting character has been in at least one gunfight. If all of the NPCs are randomly generated using the same procedures, the 60% chance applies to everybody else in the game too. That's a very dangerous world to live in!

JAMES

So, given the discussion of rules-quibbling with Marvel Supers—what are people's preferred house rules/modifications? The two things I usually do are:

* Cut Body Armor in half—if your rank is Amazing, instead of stopping 50 points of damage it only stops 25, for example. Characters can optionally make the power take up two slots, to get the full amount of protection.

* Unnamed goon characters only have Health equal to their Endurance.

- **Me:** My twenty-five year old sheets and notes are still in the box, which document some specific Champions-esque modifications. * A new Talent, "Luck," combining Luck/Unluck from Champions, so that the hero gets bonuses when losing and penalties when winning. * Zero-time dialogue during action sequences I also tried to implement a different action/ordering method, in which we state actions in reverse order of Intuition (all characters, foes too) and then carry them out in order of Agility. I don't recall that we managed actually to do this. These aren't best practices for me or recommendations for anyone else. Merely what we did or tried to do at that time.
- **Noah:** I like the idea of lowering Body Armor. A possibility I'm considering for future play is to calculate Health according to the book, then reduce it by 50%, while keeping Body Armor as-is.

JOHN

Thanks Ron for engaging with the scenario-design/game-design question. You're right, I was romanticizing game design, and stuck in this loop of "I want to write a game that does X! ...but I could just play that using this existing game". The answer is not to sweat it, start wherever I want, get scribbling and playing, and see where it ends up. And a new game is not any better than a new scenario or a new way of creating scenarios for an existing game. And yes, by "particular play experience", I meant in the high-level sense of what is this game about, what are the primary activities of the players and characters, etc., and not in the sense of writing plot or pre-playing. I suppose it's fair that you always pick on my phrasing in this respect, considering how many times you had to explain to me, at the Forge and when you were developing Circle of Hands, the idea of preparing to play without planning what's going to happen!

- **Me:** I'm glad you liked it. Am I right or wrong in suspecting that you are still stuck a little bit on *publishing* as a factor in this question? Is your question as originally conceived, or as modified through this dialogue, taking that as a given - that we are assessing a Thing To Buy with a game's name on it (or not on it)? Because I think that's something to jettison as well.
- **John:** "Publishing", yes, in the sense of: a game in polished form, available to the public; but no, not in the sense of: a thing that I sell, market, promote, and think of as an income stream. From what I've read about independent RPG publishing, the 80/20 rule seems to apply, but in reverse: the game development and writing is 20% of the effort, and the other 80% of the effort is other areas in which I have no particular skills or interest (marketing, promotion, logistics, etc., and art (interest but no skills)). So no, I don't aspire to create a career or side hustle in game publishing. But I do have this remaining desire to create a game and put it out into the world (for free), with my name on it. And I admit that my motivations are mostly personal, which I think is non-ideal. () Cred: I want to elevate my status in the hobby from "good GM" to "game designer". And I'm familiar with the argument that a GM is a game designer, and I agree with it. But still, I want to be able to answer that question "oh, what game have you made?" () Personal legacy: as they say, build some thing that you can put your name on. I don't get that from my day job. I would like to have a book (pamphlet?) on my shelf with my name on it. So I have ideas for games, and I work on them, but I sometimes think: "I could probably play this scenario / get this play experience with X published RPG (with maybe a few tweaks)."
- **Ron:** Screen conversation next for sure!