PATREON COMMENTS ON THE NATURALISTIC-FANTASY/HARNMASTER POST

SEAN

I'll swerve slightly into early 90s CRPG space called a game called Darklands. A game where peasant fighters and nuns with healing skills. Moody and supernatural, takes place in later Medieval Holy Roman Empire. This had an effect on my thinking and for a time I tried to modify everything from D&D, Runequest, and Rolemaster into something that could emulate it. I even started to occasionally use the silver standard instead of gold, to make gold more valuable and create a degree of verisimilitude. In terms of systems, I never did find one that worked for me in that regard. Games are geared towards that special forces, rock n roll band style of play that never questions whether there can be too much fantasy. The closest I came was Legend, which was Mongoose's Runequest II, I think, which is really just Magic World. Even though it is difficult to be a sorcerer in Magic World (Elric, Stormbringer 5, I mean you get it) it still isn't the same as a bunch of green grocers having to suddenly deal with a dire wolf that just showed up at the market.

As for play, this is always a harder sell to players. Magic is not just dessert, its a crutch in play. Down to 2 hits? Well someone heal me! So most of play in this regard fizzles out after initial encounters, though this could be a case of my prep/ situation be out of alignment with my goal of less fantastic play. A few things that have worked over the years though: the afore mentioned replacing gold prices with silver. Its pure psychology but when someone finds an actual piece of gold, there is a satisfying sense of wonder. And less treasure in general. Money makes heroes, a little money lets would-be heroes take the day off from the farm.

It is also interesting how location can maintain the less fantastic in conjunction with play. Much fantasy is journey oriented. Young heroes go off into the world like they were going to college or the military etc... But I found as GM and a player that the game maintains a sense of being grounded when play and situations happen around where friends and family are located. The idea that a character is not a full time adventurer creates a different dynamic.

- Me: What sort of actionable situations come to mind? Especially specifying that my use of this term is not dedicated to a known, pre-understood plan of action.
- Sean: It has taken me a bit to think about this one. And the thinking has ranged over quite a far field. I took some inspiration from King of Dragon Pass, the computer game. In that vein, I would think situations that involve the livelihood of the community. This could be health issues with livestock or cattle thieving. Wolves going after herds or herds that come across something that is poisoning or, if you want to add in chaos, corrupting them. Interpersonal disputes or disputes between villages. Somewhat larger issues might be the arrival of missionaries in the area, seeking to convert people. Armies moving through the region, drafting animals and people, taking forage and food. Anything that might upset the balance of the community. From large to very small and personal.
- Me: That's definitely the sort of thing I consider as well. The next step - and a recent play experience has brought this forward - is what such a situation means in terms of playing characters (not distinguishing between PCs and NPCs). We are all familiar with a scenario beginning with a couple of paragraphs about some such situation - which then quickly becomes backdrop, NOT situation, because then the entire thing is about finding the corrupted well or seeking the lost sacred calf or discovering the misunderstanding so that the people from village A will hug people from village B. Or for the missionaries, locating the spirit of the village ancestor so that the gullible villagers will stop listening to them. To repeat - not playing the situation at all, but treating it as backdrop for task-oriented "adventure." People **say** they play "in" Glorantha or "realistically" all the time, but this is what they fucking **do**. Bluntly, especially in the context of things like King of Dragon Pass. If one does not do any such thing, then what? Wandering, blither, "character play," going nowhere? Chaos, meaning, one or more players goes into shitplay and does random stupid stuff? The fellow I discussed such things with, a few nights ago, could not conceive of play which would do anything else unless outcomes and the details of the moment were nicely adjusted as play went along "for the story." I'm pretty sure that's not what you mean, so let's drill further: given an actionable situation such as you describe, what would **actions** be? And by whom? And established in play how, given what sort of spoken interactions among the participants?
- Sean: Right, those are just the stepping off points before play. If your character above is in play, then an inciting incident is in order. A shepherd girl comes in from the north farthing saying the sheep are sick. Your character could then make a choice to draw in others or go by herself. Action and reaction. I am hesitant to characterize something like "investigate" or use terms that are too literary, like inciting incident. But the potential energy of play needs something to make it Kinetic. that may be more procedure than Action as you are describing. A red-wooled sheep chasing a child through town should be enough juice to entice the characters to interact with what is now the beginnings of a situation. In my head, I often see it as the option for the characters to run towards or run away from the lure I am putting in front of them. And if they choose not to engage, the situation in the background just moves on without them, creating consequences down the line.
- Me: You're still writing adventures, though, it seems to me, in what you describe. "Lures." "How to get them involved." As ff they were stuck in mud and you are extending sticks to pull them out, and if they don't take this one, well, OK, they or at least someone will take another. Maybe your thoughts are still similar to those of the fellow I mentioned; this is exactly how he was talking. What if each character did what what the player thought they would do, given the

evident circumstances without such in-your-face lures? What if you played each NPC as doing that as well [i.e., they "think they're the protagonist"]? What if the dynamics of interacting characters were such that rising action may well occur without you being in charge of it? What if your GMing authorities, e.g., scene openings, coincidental meetings, were either causal (this must be the case) or arbitrary (because you're both in the forest, why not bump into one another), rather than directed toward some "problem" to solve? He was scared when I said that. "But how could that be a one-shot??" By which he meant any sort of story, rather than the blithering zilch-and-shit play he feared. Does that fear seem familiar to you?

- Sean: I am not afraid of them missing out on the adventure, but I do think content needs to present itself in play for the characters to act on. But if I am understanding we re giving the players something to act on play begins and that point, what actions could they engage in at that point. I feel like I am missing some vocabulary to articulate those actions. Its fair to say that my example assumed neither the player nor the character knew the circumstances. But if the player knows, there is no need for any lure. They can activate the moment everyone is ready for play. I hope that makes sense. For a one shot in particular or convention play, the players do come to the table ready for whatever, at least in most cases. I honestly feel like I should pick up a version of Harnworld and we should play this out in a kind of step by step way. Maybe I am having a hard time visualizing the play in my head.
- Me: I'd like to do that.

DAVID
I think Swordbearer qualifies and possibly Paladin (I suspect that removing Malory and relocating to the continent might skew things more in this direction).
I have always wanted to play the Rolemaster Castles and Ruins supplement as more or less standalone. The idea would be to play through the years constructing and possibly defending a castle. In fact, one time I wanted to play this so much that I tried it from the player side but I was rebuked quite badly in play because nobody else was on the same page.
I have found that other attempts to play in this style have fallen apart due some of the same issues Sean brought up. I also found it is all too easy to fall back into the default of trying to find a boss fight or going treasure hunting.
Oddly enough, I did have success with this in Burning Wheel but it was completely unintentional. The initial proposed situation was that a spooky mercenary company was supposed to invade the renaissance-style city that was shared by dwarves and humans. That initial situation got deferred indefinitely and play ended up being a lot of interpersonal conflict, family affairs, politicking, and slice of life scenes. So I would have to say that modern Burning Wheel is a decent candidate for this type of play (despite the many flaws that have been discussed in depth on the site).

- Me: There is a character race in the original Monster Burner called the Roden, basically rat people, who are extremely quirky and full of neat potential for play. It seems to me that slice-of-life or some sort of problem specific and even intrinsic to Roden life would be appealing.
- David: I love Roden and totally agree about the potential! They were carried forward into the Burning Wheel Codex, btw…

MORENO
HarnMaster? What a rush of memories... sadly, too few about actual play. I brought quite a lot of HM material in the 90s, falling in love with the system for reasons similar to the ones you cite: I had just GMed a long Ars Magica campaign, where the most successful play did come from the grog characters (and was always ruined by the players that always wanted to play the Mage characters...) and i was searching for a game that would play at that low-fantasy "real people" level.
I actually played very little with these rules, I think some months, less than a dozen session at most - with mixed results - during the absence of some of the most disruptive players (it was still the time of "the GM's job is to keep the group together and the players pleasure is to make it difficult"), so most of that material was never used, but I still have not sold it, even if I can see now many problems with it it's still an intriguing game that went in a rather peculiar direction.

- Me: I strongly desire to own the original, first edition publications for the setting, the orcs, and the gods. But I fear everything published after that.
- Moreno: I would be interested in hearing more about what you think of that game and about your actual play with it.
- Me: I don't know when I'll get the chance to play. However, the way that I'm reading it, and picking it up to carry about, and generally thinking about is often an indicator that I will, sooner than I think.

GREG
I have not much to say, except that I'm very excited by this kind of play. That would be my go-to for an early Runequest game. Maybe not strictly fantasy, but I suspect Degenesis may be played this way, although there are potentials to derail.

- Me: I agree. One must excise a considerable amount of the GMing section. Have you seen my essay from 11 or 12 years ago, Setting and emergent stories?
- Greg: Yes, that's actually with that essay that I came to know Hero Wars and Degenesis, now that I think about it. 80% of the text of the version I have could actually be excised: it has all the worst flaws of a white wolf product (tons of bad

prose, metaplot, etc). But there is potential, the culture is full of evocative bits to just play powerful cultural evocations in a very harsh environment.

- Me: With no lack of violence and monsters, either. I used the term "slice of life" in the post, but it doesn't really fit. I think the degree of calm vs. fraught, regarding many different things, is definitely a dial with its full range available.
- Greg: That's how I understood it. "events arising from the geography, ecology, and immediate social history." doesn't mean no monster of violence. It could be encountering a bear while chopping wood. A raid with the village soldiers to destroy the nest of mutants insects installed too close of the economic activity. Dealing with the internal division due to a child having apocalyptic visions - and people divided between treating it as heresy or prophecy. Being married or sold to a rival village as a mark of alliance to preserve peace or avoid being raided. The point is just that it arrives organically from the local ecology, not "this super alien evil is the main threat and everyone will beat it with its super powers". I think it would be easy to keep things really weird in a Degenesis game, but still maintaining that naturalistic feel. The "nature" of the world is just very weird.

ALAN BRADLEY

My first encounter with this style of play was with very early, perhaps even first edition, Chivalry and Sorcery. The game didn't get past character generation. The combination of complex multi-stage character generation that usually produced "you're a peasant!" results didn't appeal.

Later on, I did play in a Thief oriented AD&D (1e, naturally) game. It worked. Funnily enough, it was in a small city with rural hinterland setting, rather than in a big city. We were highwaymen and burglars, not pickpockets.

Recently I've been thinking about trying something of the sort again. My main idea is to constrain the range of social class backgrounds, so that characters are neither serfs nor aristocrats, but rather yeomen or the lower class of gentry, who aren't necessarily richer. (But they can ride around in shitty armour on dubious horses, and potentially become knights!)

What system? Probably Basic Roleplaying, borrowing anything interesting I want to add from RQ2. Or I might say "to hell with it", and go with Prince Valiant.

Other material I have in my collection that I would consider: I have all the dual-statted (Rolemaster/Fantasy Hero (Hero system)) Campaign Classics books. The most relevant is Robin Hood, which obviously focuses on peasant/yeoman characters. Pirates would also be relevant – your character can have nearly any background, but you're a pirate. Vikings also deserves a mention – characters are pretty much generic free peasants/petty landowners, and "adventuring" is actually a rational response to hardships of farm life.

In the end, I suppose Basic Roleplaying would be the system best suited for this kind of game. Magic World would be there in the background, but not used during character generation!

- Me: What kind of adversity do you envision, or would hope to experience, in play of this kind?
- Alan: Looking at my examples, including the nearly 40 year old actual play one, they are very weighted towards outlaw/bandit situations. Obviously a lot depends on why the characters are doing this. Some options, which overlap: poverty, social marginalization, dispossession, feuds, consequences of war... Challenges/adversity: powerful people want you dead or want to do something comparably nasty. Survival (food, shelter, etc) is not guaranteed. Your social support network is compromised, unreliable or non-existent. You may be part of a marginalized group or an outsider stuck in a Strange Land. These don't necessarily imply only starting with rags and a stick. An example: you fought in the war. The war is over, you aren't getting paid anymore, and you are a long way from home. Even if you have fancy soldier gear, you can't eat it.
- Me: That's very helpful and understandable.

JESSE

I think this represents my primary interest in Shadows of Esteren. The core books seem so primed for it. They are entirely focused on history, culture, daily life and spiritual pursuits. Monsters are present but they're rare and difficult to understand. Magic is present but primarily as an expression of spiritual practice.

And then the published adventures throw all that under the bus very specifically and intentionally inventing a threat that will allow the player characters to "put aside their cultural differences and come together." But... but... WHY?!

But coming back to my interest, I am both drawn to this idea and terrified that I'm not particularly well suited to it. I know that the first thing I should probably do is pick a place on the map and sketch out just enough information so the players have a foothold to make characters.

That's such a fine line because on the one hand you want the players to have enough information that if they choose to play a "Demorthen" they know what they're getting into from a culture role and expectation point of view but you don't want to do the terrible "lore dump" thing and overwhelm them either.

- Me: [this is a new reply] I have the short introductory version of Shadows of Esteren, and I feel the same way.

GORDON

With all the caveats possible, I'll mention that there's a kickstarter for a new Harn publication right now.

I have the 1983 Harn Master (note the space) Module,, the setting-only (an interesting phenomena) map with two booklets. I never managed to use it myself. But there's a session (not using Harnmaster) some friends I've played with talk about a LOT that essentially produced rewarding play out of characters from different regions of Harn (well, in one case, pretending to be from a particular region) having lunch together and discussing the issues of the area. Hearing about how much they loved it mystified me for a long time, but nowadays, I think that came from the right kind of actionable situations implied/outlined/present in the setting, with characters that cared about the potential incitement to action.

The presence of that kind of thing carried to character building etc. for HarnMaster rules in particular ... interests me in that/those rulesets more than anything else I've heard (impressions more than details) about that/those systems.

- Me: I've been thinking about this a lot for Chivalry & Sorcery as well: that if you have a strong situation based on a location, with any degree of understandable backstory and many active entities in motion, then arguably any small set of persons who live there or have reason to be there represents a set of lenses into it, and active entities inside it. If one abandons the notion of "group" or "party" at least as much as one might for playing Sorcerer - with the same notion, however, that they are in fact in the same place/situation - then playing with a clear understanding of my "arrows" diagram, and how the system you're using relates to it, will work out very well.

- Gordon: Makes sense. I think that (or something very like it) can (and has, for me) happen sorta accidentally in play, without the clear arrows-understanding or system-connections. But it feels like this is a place where understanding those factors can actually really improve the likelihood that it will work out very well, instead of just hoping you happen sorta accidentally into doing the right things.