CLAWMARKS

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CLAWS 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION!

GREETINGS IN THE GREAT AND MIGHTY NAME OF CTHULHU.

I welcome you to CLAWs. For those just entering this society and group of friends, I hope that you will be with us for a long time. Get involved and try new things. I did, and I never looked back!

For those minions who are returning, welcome back. May this year be as crazy and awesome as the last. It was only two years ago that I first joined CLAWs and I feel as though I have been a member of this amazing group of people for eternity. For all of you who have roleplayed with me, supported me, put up with me, and managed to freak me out beyond all reason while GMing me, I salute you. UCT would never have been the same without you, and neither would I.

We'll be running tons of great events this year. Week Night Madness is a great opportunity for first time role-players to get to know more about roleplaying: these are pen and paper modules that normally run for three or four hours. We will also be running LARPs (Live Action Roleplaying games) about once a month. These games essentially involve dressing up to become a character and attempting to achieve the character's aims over the course of an evening. We will run KAOS (Killing as an Organised Sport) where we run around campus for a week tracking a target with a weapon of choice (piece of cardboard with 'knife' written on it; bit of string; water pistol). In July, we will be organising a trip up to Johannesburg for ICON, South Africa's biggest roleplaying convention, which is always a lot of fun.

And later in the year, UCT will be hosting Dragonfire, our very own weekend of madness! This year heralds the 20th anniversary of Dragonfire being run at UCT. "Dragonfire: Emerald" promises to be a memorable one. We will be poking you all for modules and LARPs to keep you up to date and in the loop.

Hope to see you all around!

CLAWthing Claire

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Surgeon-General's Warning: Role-playing may be addictive

Michelle Haward

Congratulations! You are holding a copy of CLAWmarks. Therefore you are either (a) an existing CLAWmember, (b) a potential CLAWmember or (c) someone incredibly bored who nicked the magazine from (a) or (b) to read in a dull lecture. A vastly different crowd with vastly different knowledge on what the society does and incredibly difficult to cater for. I suppose that I could tell you what roleplaying is, but I will leave that article to some other schmuck and to the poor, frazzled committee members desperately trying to convince you that it is fun enough to try. My honest opinion is that all verbal explanations fall horribly short of the experience and to figure it out you should give it a try at least once, or at the very least watch a game. It's not like you have anything to lose, is there?

Wait, is there a bad side to role-playing?

This is a topic that almost nobody will tackle since they don't want to scare you away. But honesty is the best policy, or so they say. So let's try to look at some of the downsides to this wonderful hobby. And let's see if they really exist.

Role-playing may lead to trouble remembering things (or failing courses)

At least, that's what your parents might say. Role-playing is an incredibly easy scapegoat for most people, especially those who don't quite understand it or how it works. If your marks drop a bit, or anything happens, don't be too surprised if some people tell you that it's because you spent too much time role-playing and not enough time doing your work. When you have a scapegoat it can be easier to point at that instead of at other factors (such as increasing course difficulty, a knowledge gap from an unusual or recently changed curriculum or the fact that you play

Warcraft for 10 hours a day). Granted, sometimes this may be a valid concern. If you are in 8 role-playing games a week, you are over committing yourself and need to cut back. As long as you watch your time management and make sure you have enough time to do your work, you'll be fine.

Role-playing may lead to social alienation

Now this is a tough one. I'm not going to say that it can't, because it can. But being overly enthusiastic about any hobby around people who aren't interested in it will have that effect. When you first get into something new you tend to get very excited about it and want to tell everyone about it. Unfortunately most people think role-playing is a little weird and are not interested at all. Couple this with a quick (and bad) explanation ("It's not that bad! Some friends and I just get together on a Wednesday evening and pretend that we're fairies! Not like most people think, but different, like trolls and stuff... and we roll dice and last week I killed a werewolf...") and it's hardly surprising that some people think that our minds are a little off kilter. Then add in some common role-player to role-player speech patterns (like referring to your character in the first instead of third person because it's quicker)and you'll see why some people might think role-players are complete head cases.

Other role-players can natter on about it endlessly and sharing "war stories" is a great way for two role-players who hardly know each other to connect. But when you are talking to the guy next to you in the lecture who has no interest whatsoever, it creates an uncomfortable situation. And all it takes is one situation with an overly zealous role-player for people to paint all role-players with the same brush and classify us as weirdos. So try to keep damage to a minimum or to repair some if you can. A good

rule of thumb is that if someone is interested they will ask questions and encourage further conversation. If they just sit there (or even nod and smile) they are probably waiting for the first opportunity to head for the hills.

Another problem with "social alienation" is that people who role-play together often tend to become friends. That's just the way life is. If two people share the same interests it's easier for them to build a friendship. As a result, lots of CLAW members become friends with each other. And having new friends tends to mean less time for old friends. And they can feel snubbed. Suddenly you are going to other parties and other trips to movies and skipping a few of the things they are doing. The reaction depends entirely on your other groups of friends. Some are fine with it, some will mock your hobby and some will start drawing away from you. Some might even be interested and join in. It's luck of the draw really, some people are lucky and some aren't. The important thing to remember is this happens with any new activity. If you suddenly took up tennis one would hope that you started making friends and socializing with the people you played with on a regular basis.

Role-playing may lead to altered time perception

Doesn't everything fun? If you are enjoying yourself, time will pass more quickly. This can lead to games running longer than intended. The answer is simple. Keep an eye on the time. If you really can't afford to play past a certain time set an alarm (a subtle one or your DM will kill you, in fact just warn your DM ahead of time anyway).

Role-playing may lead to participation in Satanistic activities

This is probably the biggest load of rubbish I have ever heard. People who make this claim tend not to really understand the separation of reality and fantasy. I tend to lump people who make this claim with people who claim that Harry Potter and Pokemon are Satanistic. If these things are Satanistic then so are Cinderella and the Legend of King Arthur. After all, they have fairies and magic and all that heathen stuff

too. Honestly, it's just imagination, leave it be.

But role-playing can lead to participation in other activities (hobbies). Many role-players begin to participate in the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism), start card gaming, watching more movies, anime and many other things as they discover new interests some of the other members have. But that's about the extent of it, most ramblings about its evils are nothing but that, ramblings.

Role-playing can be addictive

Finally, one I can agree with. Role-playing is a very enjoyable activity. It is social, encourages creativity and is entertaining whilst engaging – a much better use of time than watching most television shows these days. In fact, there are few hobbies which offer this mixture of stimuli in these quantities. When you are thoroughly enjoying the hobby it can be difficult to give up. Especially if you have to go "cold turkey". Short term withdrawal symptoms may include cravings and obsessive thought. But an ingenious role-player will ensure that they can participate in this activity once more and the stories and new friendships created are well worth the effort, even if people think it laughable. And by stories, I am not just referring to those created in game. Any fan of Monty Python's Four Yorkshiremen would relish the luxury of walking through the snow for 20 minutes or having to take a train into another prefecture (province) to get to a role-playing game. And yes, that is personal experience. If you're new, you won't be meeting me for a while because I am in Japan. And yet I am still part of two role-playing games, one of which I run. It helps me keep in touch with some friends from home and is a great way to socialize with some of the other foreigners here, especially some I wouldn't have met otherwise.

Overall, role-playing is a fantastically fun hobby. It is a great way to meet people and make friends. Most negative publicity is misunderstanding. So go ahead, get involved. It's worth it.

Ye Olde Historie of CLAWs

Anna Malczyk, Jonathan Hoffenberg, Richard Pruss and Marc Nussey

As you may already know, CLAWs is turning 20 this year. Its distinguished history is too long to summarise here, but here are some of the highlights since its inception in 1988, as related by Jonathan Hoffenberg, Marc Nussey and Richard Pruss (but not without disagreements and conflicting memories, of course).

Founding Members

These folks are to blame- er, congratulate for the creation of our beloved society.

Richard Pruss (Leo Marquard, Chemical Engineering) - Richard now lives in Australia and runs a design team for CISCO.

Marc Nussey (Rosebank, Engineering) - Marc lives in Cape Town and is a manager (quality assurance) for General Electric.

Nic Russman (Rosebank, Actuarial Science) - Currently he works as a SAP consultant in the UK.

Giles Embleton (Rosebank, Law) - Giles is a lawyer up in Johannesburg.

Jonathan Hoffenberg (Rosebank, BSocSci) – Jonathan is working for SHAWCO at UCT and was the first Games Master.

Some girl called Jennifer was also, apparently, involved with setting up the organisation. Who and where she is remain a mystery.

Humble Beginnings

CLAWs' fist get-together space was a room in Rosebank Res. The room (put together by an RPG outfit called the Motley Crue in 1987) was decorated with a pentagram, Lovecraftian symbols and the inscription "Obey and ye shall perhaps be spared". To add to the atmosphere, Marc recalls that some bright spark scattered 'ex-Marquard-lunch' chicken bones in a corner, 'which was probably a health hazard', though these quickly vanished behind beer bottles and grime.

This tasteful and welcoming venue was not to last, however. A few months later, the room was condemned (officially) as a fire hazard, though Marc suspects that some religious fundamentalist named Bruce was behind the closure.

A Matter of Faith

Of course, the whole Satanism furore kept rearing its ugly head. Jonathan reminisces, 'CLAWs had the feelings of being a secretive society, certainly there was not the open confrontation with Christian groups that existed in the 90s onwards'. CLAWs – being, as it is, and inflammatory group – responded to complaints with some Christian-offending posters (I also

heard a rumour about a stolen tombstone, though I think this was a bit later on). 'Not that any of us had anything to do with Satanism, or religion for that matter,' Marc recalls. 'We were in the main pretty agnostic towards the whole concept.' He adds that, by that point, the fuss over D&D was largely over.

RPing in the Good Old Days

When CLAWs started off, role-playing was hardly the accepted, widespread hobby it is today (wait a minute…). The original gang felt quite isolated, as though they were the olnly people playing D&D. Aside from one shop in Hillbrow and another on Plein Street (which later became Wizards), pickings were slim and materials scarce.

Not to mention that, by 1988, there were two dominant systems - both with their followers who would battle it out verbally on the merits of their system and the obvious flaws of the other. Of course, we're talking about AD&D versus Rolemaster. While Jonathan and some others backed the winning horse (AD&D), Marc felt differently. 'We didn't like AD&D much - in fact, at the first Dragonfire the Motley Crue basically barrelled through the dungeon hell-for-leather, much to the chagrin of Richard Pruss, who was our assigned DM for the game. Stealth was for pussies.'

At that point in history, additionally, other CLAWsy activities were yet to take off: wargaming was fledgling, there were no Collectable Card Games (Magic: the Gathering only came out in the early 90s), and there were no LARPs, either! Despite these setbacks, the first Dragonfire was held in 1989.

Men in Black

So, is the reputation that all CLAWs people are Goths well-earned? Partly. Jonathan tells me that, early on, CLAWs established a Goth look, mainly because of frequent visits to a club called the Playground. Additionally, CLAWs members wore black and hung out on the left-hand side of Jammie Stairs at the large rectangular balustrade that became known as Gargoyle Rock. Marc adds that the Goth contingent was formed around Giles Embleton and his crowd. However, most of the other members were decidedly un-Gothy (with comments such as "Bauhaus? Bah! We prefer Scorpions! And Doro Pesch rocks!" sealing their fate).

Moving Up

In the early 90s, CLAWS got its first room above a lift in the old Student Union Building (which was demolished and turned into Hlanganani). The second room (by the lift shaft) and the third (by the library) continued the fine tradition of hanging out on smelly couches, talking nonsense with fellow CLAWs members, and dodging the couples making out loudly in the corner. Just goes to show how little has changed.

And CLAWmarks?

The printing of this esteemed magazine was, for a long time, CLAWs' only real expense. Although it's unclear when it was first published, Richard remembers 'working all night on the first issue of the mag, and a guy who played an intelligent fern in Giles' game (whose name I can't remember) drew all those wonderful cross-dragon cats'.

OF GEEKS AND ROLE-PLAYING

Lucas Wheeler

I found myself in faraway Houston, TX (not to be confused with Houston, MI). The details of my detainment are not relevant to this story, but are available on request. To alleviate some of the boredom that had pervaded my sojourn, I took to driving around the city in search of entertainment. There were rumours of bookshops, comicshops and, surely, places that sold roleplaying goods. On a random stop, somewhere in the north of the city, I went in search of food. After acquiring this, I noticed a shop that had the word 'game' in its name. I went to investigate. This is what I found.

There were some World of Warcraft merch items, like the baseball hat of [+1 int], in the wnidow of the shop. This lead me not to expect too much, but in I went. I the shop was sparsely stocked, but in good repair. There were tables and chairs in the front that were reminiscent of convention roleplaying. Along the wall to the left of the door were books on shelves, glancing over the DnD books, the Core rulebooks as well as multiple expansions, I spotted a grand total of five White Wolf books. The Core Rules the three main setting books and one other. I moved over to the counter, where there was an animated conversation about chain mail. Having worked with it a bit, and knowing a little about it, I joined in the conversation. I set the record straight on certain matters. Then the conversation moved onto roleplaying, as it would. Then a random person moved up to me, who had not been involved in the converation. He asked a few harmless questions, then pointed out the various sections of the shop; not that there were many. The man behind the counter commented that he must be doing something right, if his customers start showing people around the shop. This seemed a little strange to me, and gave me an inkling of what was to come. I had entered a den of DnD nerds.

The inhabitants of the shop seemed to be the typical nerds that DnD is associated with in the mainstream. The specimen in front of me was a prime example. I was asked where I was from and how long I was staying. I was only to be there for a few weeks, which on reflecion was a few weeks too many. I was invited to join their game. This seemed like a Good Thing, until I heard more. I was told that I could play any of the 12 main classes, nevemind that I only knew of the ones in the Players Handbook. However, I wasn't particularly interested. I have since discovered that there are, in fact, classes in companion books. I was also told that I could use any feat available in the core books, note this is not the Core Rulebooks, but if I knew of any other feats that would enhance the game I was welcome to put them to the DM. Being in the wrong time zone, on the wrong side of the world, and the equator, had muddled my brain a little so the warning bells didn't start ringing. The fact that there had been no exlpanation of the setting and plot should have also alerted me to what I was dealing with.

After the brief introdction to the game that I was invited to join, they started telling me about their other games. It seemed that they had recently finished a game that had, at point, had 14 players. Fourteen! I was astounded. When I asked, they said that there had only been one person running this! This disturbed me into silence, as they started describing their characters. There was no detailed history, lovingly crafted to fit the setting. There was no motivation for what they did, or even a hint at personality. They described their characters as a list of feats. The one that sticks out in my mind was a half-elf that had dual wielding elven court blades with a weapon finessed monkey grip. After too much of this, I hesitantly asked what other systems they played. There was a slight incomprehension to the question. It seemed they didn't really play other systems, at all.

In an effort to escape, I asked if they knew where I could find a comic shop. After much discussion they gave me some directions. After promising to see them when their game started, I left hurriedly. It seems that the cliché of roleplaying geeks is, in fact, true. I had not believed it, as I had not previously encountered any of these sad creatures. All the roleplayers in South Africa are fairly normal alternative types. However, in the US, they are the outcasts that the mainstream makes them out to be. I have been scarred by the experience and may never play the game again

"TRINITY" REPORT

Zac Crumley

At the beginning of 2007 Ian began running his Trinity campaign. For those of you who don't know Trinity is a science fiction setting about a hundred years into the future, following some devastating wars, when mankind is just beginning to explore space. So far the game has taken the players to the other end of the galaxy, space stations, The Moon and to a variety of countries across Earth. Some of the more interesting people we've met have included aliens, religious fanatics, major political figures and deadly mercenaries.

The game began with the party joining a space exploration/colonization expedition to a planet at the other end of the galaxy. Occupying various positions in the mega-corporation sponsored trip we all boldly set off to find out what happened to the last colony, all except Miranda who was remaining on earth managing communications for the expedition. The trip had a minor hiccup when Warren's character, Taylor, was found stowed away onboard the ship suffering complete amnesia. Despite remembering nothing about his past he displayed a rather disturbing list of skills.

Upon arriving at the desolate planet we discovered that nothing remained of the previous colony except a very empty base in bad need of repair. Strange hallucinations didn't help the ominous feelings we were getting.

After a relatively peaceful month of getting the colony back on its feet, things got very interesting. It was just another peaceful day at the office when systems began failing, floors began caving in and small 'alien armadillo rats' began appearing all over. Initial impressions were that they were 'cute', however these changed fairly quickly when the party began discovering that the rats were in fact responsible for the problems around the colony. Opinions went even further downhill when the rats became hostile and began attacking the party.
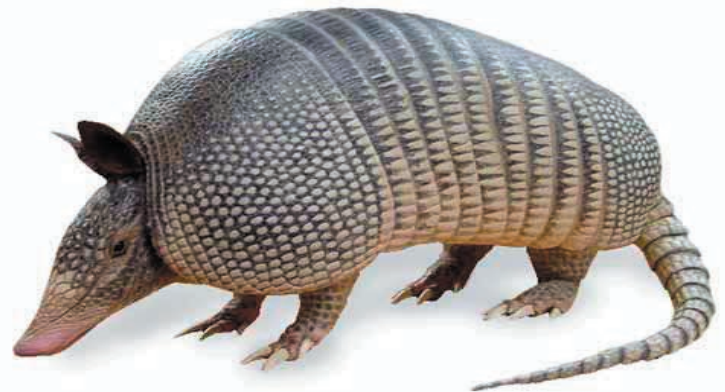
The motley crew that comprises the party is as follows:

Simon (played by Karl): An astrologist who knows more stars and constellations than you could shake a stick at. Lately he's been losing his sanity faster than some one having tea with Great Cthulhu.
Special characteristic: Amazingly, every time Simon is saved by the party, and it happens surprisingly often, he is naked.

Bruce (played by Zac): A desensitized, disfigured, jumpy ex-Australian air force pilot. He follows the 'shoot first, ask anyone left alive questions afterwards' methodology.
Special characteristic: Will always be caught on camera when performing criminal or illegal activities.

Taylor (played by Warren): An amnesiac with a wide variety of skills. He likes impersonating important people to get into places he's not meant to.
Special characteristic: Always falls down holes. In fact sometimes holes even fall on him.

Eloisa (played by Claire): A British upper class military sort. She's also the only person in the party with any real medical training.
Special characteristic: Never checks for security cameras, despite psionic powers that allow her to do so with ease.

Gregor (played by Dom): A beer-guzzling engineer who doesn't understand the concept of speed limits on roads.
Special characteristic: Gregor has made his peace with God more times than you'd believe. These spiritual epiphanies have occurred in locations as diverse as the upper stratosphere and geothermal plants on distant planets.

Miranda (played by Michelle): A mysterious young lady with clairvoyant and telepathic powers.
Special characteristic: Tries to keep the party from causing too much trouble and continually fails horribly.

After some heroics the party was overwhelmed and were all rendered unconscious.

However instead of waking up in heaven or hell, we woke up still within our mortal coils. We had also developed some interesting powers, psionic powers to be exact. This occurring without special processes is extremely rare. However instead of being given an opportunity to contemplate this we were rather busy trying to get off the planet in the middle of a battle between the rats (who brought their friends, the energy blasting, human killing aliens) and the remaining colonists. Even though the colonists tried to leave us behind at one point we managed to battle our way to a shuttle craft and return the main ship which had been in orbit. We were just about to dock when explosives were set off inside the ship by some unknown party. Some fancy flying got us out of danger just in time. But before we could say "Oh, shit." we were teleported by some unknown source back to orbit around the earth, where we were promptly detained by the authorities.

Some clever work by Miranda got us out of arrest and into an upper-crust society ball, where the leaders of the various psionic orders met us firsthand and decided upon our fate, very rudely I might add. Eventually we ended up in a special training facility in Scotland where we were given basic instruction in our new abilities.

Definitely the lowest moment of our training was when the instructors were told that it was 'OK to kill us' during a particularly dangerous training exercise. They didn't manage to, but everyone involved in that particular training session spent the night in an intensive care unit. As you might imagine, this didn't do any wonders for whatever trust we had in our superiors.

After some time training we were given a real assignment. Our brief was to track down a Chinese man, involved in a number of shady dealings who hadn't been seen for months. First stop: his apartment in Hong Kong. Our plan for breaking and entering had seemed really good on paper. It seemed to work too. We found evidence to suggest that our next stop should be Beijing, discovered a possible accomplice and found lots of juicy information

about his dealings. The problem was when we discovered that we had been caught breaking and entering on a highly advanced surveillance system. This discovery coincided with the arrival of the police. But in true party style, it only took several larcenous acts and a fake identity or two to successfully shake the cops and get on a flight to Beijing.

At the airport Simon received a call requesting that he return home on the next possible flight. It was only later after we had left him at the airport that we discovered that he was missing. Further investigation revealed that he had been dragged into an unmarked black van soon after we left. That night Eloisa had a vision of some one our mark had been watching in desperate trouble. This led us to a hospital where said person had been in a coma for years.

In the true spirit of party loyalty we decided to find Simon later and went to the hospital first. Unfortunately we only arrived after the cops and Chinese authorities were on the scene. None the less we used some half truths to gain access where we found that murder most foul had been done. Smoothly exiting before any of the authorities realized that we weren't really authorized to be there, we decided to follow our next lead: a hushed up experiment happening at a local university. Miranda was loyally trying to find Simon, frantically calling all the hospitals in the phone book (not to mention all the morgues but we never found out about that).

After carefully scouting out the university and experiment site we decided to break into the lab the night before the experiment. We were surprised to find out that the experiment was

happening under the cover of night as we were entering the site. Unfortunately the people conducting it weren't interested in us pointing out that the experiment was unsafe and that they were about to turn Beijing into a very large crater. We also encountered a strange woman who was part of the scientists working on the experiment and knew what was happening. She escaped the scene before the experiment went haywire and exploded, with us only a few metres from ground zero.

After some more strange dreams/hallucinations we woke up in the rubble and began picking up the pieces. It turned out that the experiment had not vaporized Beijing, but it had developed some extraordinary powers in a small percentage of the local populace. One example was the angelic lady who had developed amazing healing powers and was healing everyone who had been caught in the blast from the experiment. Further exploration of a suspiciously quiet Beijing also revealed another such individual who had developed demonic powers and was starting his own little revolution by attacking the Chinese secret service's head quarters. This coincided with the arrival of a mysterious military force who began attacking the authorities and causing chaos. The night's proceedings came to a head when the angel and demon merged their powers to create a bubble of psionic energy that engulfed Beijing. Taylor (in his usual style) decided that the entire party were under some sort of mental control and ran all the way out of Beijing. The rest of us went to lick our wounds, and used Miranda's psionic powers to try and find Simon. Eventually we did find him, lying naked in the middle of the road in outer Beijing.

By then Taylor had come to his senses and we managed to leave Beijing before the Chinese military arrived and took control. Eventually we reunited with Taylor, got air lifted out of China and returned to Scotland to lick our wounds and wonder what the hell was going on.

After recovering, Bruce, Gregor and Miranda returned to China (via Tasmania, thanks to Gregor's brilliant sense of direction when teleporting) and tracked down the mysterious woman who had evaded us at the experiment. She was dying from some sort of drug but we managed to extract some cryptic clues before she kicked the bucket.

Next the party went to Denmark where some one had been monitoring us in China through surveillance devices. We tracked down the address and discovered a house with several secret rooms. But before we could really investigate, a team of Danish rent-a-SWAT arrived and attacked the party, severely injuring Miranda (which prompted Simon to go hulk on them and turn them all into red stains on the floor). After using some convenient C4 to 'remove any evidence' the Danish cops arrived and laid down the law by arresting two party members for terrorist activity.

At the time of writing the situation was thus: Two party members were in hospital, two party members were under arrest for terrorist activity (neither of them actually did anything) and the final two party members (the least mentally stable by the way) were heavily armed, had hostages and were about to find out what had happened to the rest of the party.

With grins like these, you know they're up to something evil...

Taunting the Beast

Back in the day, they all looked so normal...

There are still some shad characters around, though...

As predicted, CLAWs people gravitate towards the food...

...but when there's no food available, you have to make due.

Old CLAWroom decor

Warning: CLAWs is detrimental to your health

CLAWthing is NOT impressed.

Adeeb, getting assaulted by girls. As usual

Well, someone has to keep him in line...

'The Window' Reviewed

Zac Crumley

Role playing has two extremes. On the one hand lies that which was born from table top war gaming, the combat oriented stuff. It's also known as dungeon crawling, wannabe Warhammer or munchkin-focused rubbish, depending on who you ask and how polite they are. This is the rules-heavy, combat-focused, power gaming stuff. In the other extreme lies 'true' role playing. Rules are less important, things are much more freeform and the focus is on telling a story or portraying a character. It can even begin to blur the line with theatre, especially in its live-action incarnations.

Of course, most games, campaigns and modules tend to fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Even the most tactical of dungeon crawls will have a player accusing another player (in character) of stealing his +3 Returning Dagger of Zombie Slaying every once in a while, and even the most freeform LARP will occasionally have a DM rolling a dice when one character decides to off another (which happens disturbingly often in LARPs).

I'll admit now that my personal taste leans towards the second extreme. There's nothing quite as tiresome as having to look up the rules for disrupting spells on page two billion and five of the D&D player's guide because the half-dragon vampire ogre that your eighteen strength, three intelligence half-orc barbarian just charged at decided to use an empowered, maximised, silenced fireball on you.

It's for my above preference that I originally looked at the Window system. It's a free role playing system that can be found on the internet. But note that by system, I don't mean setting. It's just a set of rules that can be used and adapted to any setting or genre that you want to play.
And before I go any further I should state unambiguously that the Window system is very much orientated towards the so-called 'true' role playing. If that's not your +5 vorpal cup of tea, you may want to skip the rest of this.

OK, now that they've cleared out, we can get onto the important stuff. Unlike its Microsoft counterpart the Window system is pretty good at what it sets out to do: provide a very light set of rules for engaging in 'true' role playing.

The (electronic) book that the rules come in sets out pretty clearly what the Window system is and isn't. It also explains what the Window system is aimed at, and gives three precepts that are universal to most freeform 'true' role playing. Following that, it describes the 'rules' of the systems and finishes up with some optional rules that you may or may not want to use in a game. All in a neat, tidy, 42 page document.

The rules revolve around rolling a dice and trying to roll under a target number (default is 6). Therefore the lower the number of the dice you roll the better your character is. And… well, that's about it as far as hard and fast rules go.

The game rules have a good deal more space devoted to the other things you need to do to use this system, such as describing your character properly and role playing your character appropriately. But odds are, if you're using this system, you'd be aware of these things.

It's also worth mentioning that the Window system is not a good place to start role playing. As the book points out, beginners should look elsewhere (one of White Wolf's more 'friendly' systems would be my recommendation or, if you absolutely have to, there's always D&D 3rd edition…).

Of course nothing is perfect, and I do have some minor issues with the Window system. First is that you need a full set of role-playing dice to use it as it stands. This isn't such a major thing, but I've always liked the way that some systems (White Wolf's storytelling system for example) only use one type of dice.

Linked to that is the fact that the Window system wants d30s. Based off the way the rules are set up this makes sense, I'll concede. But come on, doing the d6 and d10 trick is annoying, and finding a real d30 is more trouble than your average role player wants to go to.

But considering the fact that it's free, you can't really complain about minor things like dice that don't really impact on anything in a significant way.

Overall, you enjoyment of the Window system is really dependent on how you like your role playing. If you're a fan of the more freeform 'true' role playing, then it provides a nice framework and imparts some important pieces of wisdom. If you're more of the dungeon crawl sort, you probably won't find much of interest here. If you're not sure and it sounds vaguely interesting, you should have a look, after all it's free (insofar as those *@#^&$ over at Telkom let the internet be free…).

The window system can be found at http://mimgames.com/window/

A View Through 'The Window'

Adrianna Pińska

How much does your system weigh?

I don't like rules-heavy systems.

There are many things that can be said in favour of them. A rigid set of rules helps to keep minmaxers in line[1]. A rich ruleset allows more interesting factors to have a concrete system effect -- if combat manoeuvres like feinting, assuming a defensive posture or going berserk actually *do something*, players are more likely to use them creatively. An extensive system description of your character's skills enforces in-character behaviour -- a character is more likely to try something she's good at than something she's bad at. But are all these things really desirable?

A sensible social contract should take care of minmaxers equally well -- if everyone agrees that the DM can set house rules and has the final word on what is allowed and what isn't, the DM can veto any silliness and rule abuse. Interesting factors can still have a system effect, even if there are no specific rules for them, if the DM has the power to grant spot bonuses for player creativity and in-character appropriateness. As for players deciding what to do -- I think it is far better for them to try whatever seems most appropriate for their characters and the situation, without a clear idea of how well it's going to work. The game becomes rather dull when a

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[1] Or so they say. Simon is of the opinion that an abundance of rules facillitates minmaxing rather than preventing it.

character *always* uses a particular weapon in combat because it has a bigger bonus than any other weapon he has. In my opinion, when players are spending more time shuffling numbers around and calculating probabilities than being in character, the system has failed.

One major drawback of light systems is that they require more overhead, especially at the start. Heavy systems, assuming they're well-designed, can be very easy to use -- because there's a rule for everything, there's very little work left for the players and the DM. If you're using a light system, you have to make up a lot of house rules and boundaries by yourself.

I discovered The Window a few years ago, and thought it looked pretty neat. Since then, I have used it in my *Legend of the Five Rings* campaign, and in *By The Rivers Dark*, a generic fantasy D r a g o n f i r e module.

Legend of the Five Rings

I have tried to preserve as much of the L5R system's setting-influenced flavour as possible, and have tried to be consistent about it, so that players can easily adapt cool system mechanics from the L5R sourcebooks.

I use the five rings for traits -- they are not broken up into independent stats as in the L5R system. I simplified the skills a lot, merging many that were too specific for my tastes: for example, a single combat skill replaces individual weapon skills, defence, etc. (ideally, combat should be run at a higher level than blow-by-blow

attack, dodge and damage). I have kept the "emphasis" concept -- players may purchase skill specialisations which grant a bonus. Each player may designate a single "school skill" which is the focus of her character's training. There are no character ranks, so the special school techniques are purchased with XP, like other specialisations -- a character may only purchase the translated school techniques within her school skill.

In The Window, traits and skills are normally independent of one another, but I wanted rings to have a bigger influence over character stats -- so better-than-average rings grant bonuses to associated skills.

The addition (or rather subtraction) of all these bonuses makes things a bit fiddly. It also tends to make it difficult for the players to fail. To reduce this problem, I introduced the raising mechanism from L5R, which allows players to take a voluntary penalty to a roll in exchange for a better result when they succeed -- but I am still re-thinking the bonus amounts.

Spellcasting is an ordinary skill roll which uses the Spellcraft skill. There is no hard limit to how many spells can be cast in a day, but characters keep a tally, and I tell them when they start feeling woozy.

Because I like botches, I added a botch mechanism: whenever a player naturally rolls the highest number possible on a die, regardless of the roll's success otherwise, he must roll a d30. If the second roll is less than the number of sides on the first die, the roll is a botch, and

something suitably horrible happens.

The Window doesn't have a built-in experience mechanic, so I introduced triangular buying for skills and 5 x triangular buying for rings. Initially, I awarded session XP as well as skill XP for botching or succeeding really well (the inverse of botching). This very rapidly made everyone extremely skilled, so I now award skill XP only, and XP for in-character training. I'm thinking of switching to in-character training entirely.

There is currently no honour mechanic, but its absence is messing around with some technique translations, so I'm thinking of adding a sixth (DM-controlled) trait for it.

This adaptation is very much a work in progress. Since my campaign is about to re-form after a holiday hiatus, I think it's a good time to introduce some tweaks.

By The Rivers Dark

This module started out life as a quick-and-dirty D&D game which I mostly made up as I went along. When I was converting it to a proper con module, I thought that The Window would make a good system for it: it's simple, and thus both DM- and newbie-player-friendly; and it's descriptive, so it helps players get in character quickly.

Simon and I used the standard Window system, straight off the website. The only extension was the addition of a magic trait and some specific magical spells which were treated as skills. We also used the optional armour rules.

Because we were writing once-off characters, we could make up ranges of creatively-named skills, and give every character something he or she was really bad at. For every skill and trait, we selected the most important word in the description, to make it easier for players and DMs to identify skills at a glance.

Our playtest revealed a problem with the way we had written up the module's initial investigation, and a few other skill tests: we had been too restrictive in specifying the success targets, and it was too difficult for players to discover all the clues. In the final version, we kept things as simple as possible -- allowing the DM to decide the difficulties of most of the targets, or even forgo rolling entirely if players asked the right questions.

Conclusion

I recommend The Window to anyone who is looking for a cut-down, unobtrusive system and is prepared to put in a bit of extra effort into the initial game setup. It's flexible and adaptable to just about any setting -- there are many existing optional rules (for magic and super-powers, for example), and it is equally easy to add your own. If you've had enough bean-counting, give it a try in your next experimental campaign.

Awake from Heat

Adriaan Wessels

I awake from hot, bright dreams of running through the African bush killing people. In my dreams, I am always superhuman - stronger, faster, sleeker. Waking up is a shock. I disconnect my catheter and all the other leads and heave myself into my wheelchair. I reconnect myself to the chair. My whole life is spent connected to machines, surrounded by machines. Sometimes I feel like a machine.

I am trying to escape this life by finding a job. The interview goes badly. They always do. I was honourably discharged, but the Reconnaissance Commandos have a bad reputation. People say we're all crazy from too much time across the border fighting in the endless bush wars. I suppose they're right about many of us, but I feel sane. Somehow I struggle to convince others of this.

I sleep again. This time I'm a fighter jet, dancing the intricate dance of a dogfight in African skies. These are the best dreams. I can't see who I'm killing, which makes it easier when I wake up. My dreams come at a cost. Either I feel them, which leaves me saddened and depressed, or I suppress my emotion, which makes me like a machine. Everything has a price.

Willem phones me. We served together and were friends once. Now he lives far away, has a life, a real job, a wife. All these things put a distance between us. He always asks how I am, whether my pension is enough. I always joke about it; he always offers to send me money. I always refuse. When the ritualised sparring is over he surprises me: "I'll be in Pretoria next week. Let's go for a beer?" I try to refuse, but he won't let me.

I don't remember any dreams in the morning. It's rare, but when it happens I am left with mixed feelings. There is no depression, but also none of the savage joy of the memories of cold completeness. I feel like an addict who longs for the pure clean feeling he gets from a hit. I feel clean but empty.

We meet at a bar we used to go to and drink beer. There is stale talk of the old times, old stories retold that neither of us want to hear. Willem stops. "I've heard some rumours. There's a black project using medical cases. Something about piloting." He looks at me quizzically. Suddenly there is a rushing in my ears and I am the machine from my dream. I rush at him. He knocks me over. "You're fucking crazy man!" I don't hear from him again.

I dream again. It's something new this time. It goes horribly wrong - oil and smoke, explosions and death. The dream ends abruptly and I wake up sweating, shivering. It was too much like the accident, a horrible reminder of my mortality. They told me that there wouldn't be any physical side-effects. They forgot to mention the mental side-effects. I unplug the leads from my head and try to sleep. I'll get a reprimand for this, but I don't care.

I hear my mail being delivered. I sort through it, tossing out the junk. The two letters I expect are there. First I open my disability pension, the same as always. It doesn't come close to making me happy. Next, my paycheck from the department. I chuckle, a dry laugh, at the nom de guerre on the letterhead: `Special Forces Brigade (Medical) - Remote Polysomnography Unit'. Everyone has a price.

Vampire: The Eternal Struggle (V:TES) for Noobs

Val Teixeira

Now I know all of you have been staring and drooling over us real card-gamers, and wondering if you'll ever be cool enough to play a real CCG.

Well, unfortunately for you, this article will not help you be cool. But, it should get you far enough so that you don't look like a complete dork all the time (unless, of course, your name is Alfred E. Newman, and then there's really no hope for you).

Now, when you enter into the social world of V:TES, the first step towards loserdom is to think that it is a 1-on-1 CCG. Constantly challenging people to a duel is an immediate sign of dorkiness, so resist the urge you picked up in Pokeman or Duelmasters, or whatever it is that you kids are into these days, and wait for more players. If asked what is the correct size for a V:TES game, always answer 4 or 5 (or risk being pointed and laughed at). In social games, 3 players are also great and 6/7 players take forever, but can still be a whole barrel of fun.

The point of the game is to get more Victory Points (VPs) than anyone else on the table. This can be achieved in 3 ways. The first, and most typical way, is to utterly destroy and shame the person sitting to the left of you. Each time you do this (and knock person after person sitting to your left), you earn 1 VP. Another way of getting VPs is by being the last remaining player in the game. This also earns you 1 VP. The final way, which only happens in timed games, or when you hear your mom calling you home for dinner, is by surviving until time is up. This, however, only earns you half a VP. So it is possible to not be the last man (or insect) standing, but still be the victor.

So, what makes V:TES different from other CCGs? Here are a few things to look out for.
1) Generally an older, more intelligent and mature group of players.
2) Only a small percentage of cards that are banned since the game started around 15 years ago (it's less than 1% of the cards). So you won't have to constantly buy expansion after expansion to just make decks that are playable. And yes, you do get players who play nothing but cards from 10 years back and still win, as well as players who play nothing but cards that have been printed in the last year and win.
3) There are no such things as all-powerful or sure-win decks. Every deck has weaknesses that can be exploited, although some decks are obviously worse than others.
4) You need to balance your life with the life of your minions that do all your work in the game.
5) There are different routes you can take to win (typically there are four main strategies, but there are many others).
6) There is an in-game political element that uses votes and voting to achieve your aims of winning.
7) There is a detailed combat system that graphically illustrates what happens when the creatures of the night have different opinions that can only be rectified by fighting it out. (You know, those eternal questions like, "where do socks disappear to when you wash them?")
8) The focus of the game is on your minions, and their ability to achieve your aims.
9) The cards have some very good artwork.
10) Your hand size is quite consistent in V:TES. You will usually replace a card when you play a card.
11) We hold monthly tournaments in Cape Town.
12) Most importantly, we have a great social network. I'm still proud to say that we don't have any dickhead players here, and I plan on keeping it that way.

I'll leave you with two last bits of advice.

The first is that when you join in a game of V:TES listen to what the older, more experienced guys tell you about the game. If they tell you that card X doesn't work that way, it probably doesn't, so swing with it and, if you still don't believe them, ask about it in our official newsgroup afterwards.

The second is that always, always listen to what I say, which may include demands like, "Get me a drink, beeyatch", or "Please stop groveling at my feet. Your dribble doesn't match my shoes."

If you are interested and want to find out more, join our newsgroup at: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/vtes-ct

Or contact me (Val) at 082 4299977.
But please, try to keep it about VTES. I know you think I'm cool and you're cool and we should hang, but the fact that you'll just end up buying me drinks and expensive trinkets to try and impress me, really doesn't appeal to me.

Vampire: The Eternal Struggle (V:TES) for Playa's

Val Teixeira

I've read many articles about strategy in V:TES, and so I decided to write a short thought-provoking article about some of the things I think about when I am building a winning deck. Here are some issues you should bear in mind when constructing your own deck.

In every successful deck, there are always two parts that make it successful. The first and most important part is the 'payload'. The payload is the cards your deck uses to damage the pool of your prey. There are four generally accepted archetypes in V:TES – bleed, vote, combat and wall. There are a few exceptions to this.

The goals of the first, bleed, is to reduce their prey's pool by either massive bleeds or by mass bleeds. Massive bleeds are the most popular form of ousting and are often achieved with cards like Conditioning, or Legal Manipulations, or Loss. The biggest weakness to this style of deck is deflection style cards and well-timed Archon Investigations. Mass bleeds, on the other hand, employ minion superiority – in other words, lots of little bleeds. The weaknesses of this style of play is in your minions (who are generally smaller and weaker), bleed reduction, and the strain it puts on your library (you usually need a lot of cards to get these decks going).

The goals of the second, vote, is to use political action cards that can directly damage their prey's pool. Sometimes this damage is direct, such as Kine Resources Contested votes, and sometimes the damage can be indirect, such as Banishments that can force you to spend pool to keep your vampires in play. The weakness of this style of play is that you either need more votes than everyone else on the table, or you need the support of other players on the table for your deck to succeed.

The third archetype, combat, punishes their prey

for losing their minions to torpor or being burnt. This style of play uses cards such as Dragonbound or Fame to directly damage your prey's pool. The biggest advantage of combat decks is that they often cripple their prey in the process of ousting them. There are, however, some major disadvantages to combat decks. Combat decks are often library-intensive (they need a lot of cards to work), and they rely heavily on what their prey is playing, as you will have to overcome any combat module they have in their deck in order to succeed.

The final archetype, wall, is a very uncommon style of play. It uses cards such as Army of Rats, Pentex Subversion and Smiling Jack to whittle away their prey's pool and lock up their minions. These cards need to be defended and so these decks force their prey to attack them to survive. This is the most indirect style of play and its weaknesses include having at least two players constantly attacking their resources (prey and predator) and requiring a lot of setting up. This style of play is often reserved for the most patient of us and it is generally a very slow, but very powerful style of play.

The vast majority of decks focus on a single payload. Some decks may include two payloads, such as vote and bleed, which is still fairly common, but more than two payloads are rare. The next thing you need to focus on is your method of delivery – in other words, how are you going to make sure your payload works? The method can depend on the payload.

For example, if you are using a bleed payload, your delivery mechanism could be stealth, such as provided by cards like Lost in the Crowds or Plasmic Form. The point is to get more stealth than other players can get intercept. Another alternative is block/minion denial which uses cards like Sensory Deprivation or Call of the Hungry Dead or Crocodile's Tongue to stop minions from being able to block you. Combat or 'bruise'

is another method which punishes players every time they block you by damaging or destroying their blockers in the combats that follow, which can be very brutal if they play cards that make you worry about blocking, such as Dawn Operation, Hidden Lurker or Storm Sewers.

In a vote payload, not only do you need to worry about all the things that a bleed payload worries about, but you have the additional worry of getting your votes to pass. The advantage of votes is that it comes with inherent stealth, and that people put in more defenses against bleeds than against votes. The problem is that you also have to make sure your votes are able to pass, which can be done by making sure you have more inherent votes on your vampires (a couple of big titles), or by playing cards that can push your votes through. This is most common in presence, but there are a few other cards and disciplines that can help. Another method is to use a combat delivery method to target and destroy other voters on the table (or bully them into submission). The final method is to use cards like bribes to give incentives to people to vote for you, or to include votes that can help out others, such as Rumors of Gehenna.

In the combat payload, there are a handful of tried and tested methods that work well. There is the 'multi-rush' method, which revolves around one star minion entering combat repeatedly. This delivery method relies heavily of Fortitude, especially cards like Freak Drive, Forced March and Monster. The second, and probably most reliable, method is weenie-rush. This method uses many small minions to put pressure on your prey's minions, using cards like Haven Uncovered and Frontal Assualt. Another method is using minions that inherently have the ability to enter combat with other minions, and to constantly harass their minions, like Enkidu or War Ghouls. Stealth and targeting specific minions is another method that can sometimes work, especially in the R&R (rush and recover) style of play. This kind of deck often focuses on one vampire with fame, puts them into torpor, rescues them, puts them back into torpor and so on, until their prey is ousted.

In the wall payload, you are generally expecting a lot of actions to be directed towards you, so your main focus will be on how to deal with the onslaught. For wall decks, the term 'delivery method' can be a bit misleading. For wall decks, how you get your payload to work is basically divided into two groups. The first is an aggressive defense – in other words, you use cards that punish someone who tries to do actions against you. This can be done through combat, such as using Elephant Guardian, Sniper Rifle or Rotshreck, or it can sometimes be done outside of combat through cards like Cardinal Sin: Insubordination , Seeds of Corruption or Lock. The other method is a passive defense where you constantly turn away the people trying to assault you, biding your time until your prey is ousted. This typically includes permanent intercept of some kind (raven spies, media locations), and ways to get out of combat and ready to block again, like Majesty, Mental Maze, or Obedience. These decks usually include ways of bribing people around the table with pool/blood incentives, such as with cards like Powerbase: Chicago or the Rack to help reduce the amount of players acting against it.

Hopefully, after reading this article, you might pause and think about what you want your deck to do and how you expect it to get done before building your deck. In V:TES, i t ' s sometimes very easy to be taken in with particular combinations of cards, or with certain power cards, and build a deck revolving around them, and not really have a payload method and/or a delivery method. I have shrugged off plenty a combat deck who fail to have rush cards and end up bleeding for 1, hoping that you will block them, or a big bleed deck that had no chance of getting any of its actions successful. Remember, it sometimes pays to have more than one delivery method, in case the first one fails in a certain situation.

Good hunting!

CLASSIFIEDS

FRIDGE QUOTES

Nicky: Oh god that's good in a tight in the ropes kind of way.

Nick: We could tell what she did from her demeanour when she gets back.
Derek: She could have poisoned the salad.
Brett: I could ask her...
Derek: To poison the salad?!?

Nick: Are there any chickens around?
Michelle: Yes...
Brett: Why?
Nick: I can do awesome things with chickens.

Brett: And you have to presume that the media is run by the Aztecs.
Derek: Like Fox News...
Nick: ... run by Aztecs.

Jessica: "So, how did the fish get to the top of the volcano?"
Neil: "Interdimensional giant beetles put them there."

Andrew: "Aaah! Violence makes me horny!"
Tracy: Bleeeeuuuuurgh!

"She tried to climb on me once, but I got all stiff so she didn't anymore." - Austin

"I'm wondering why your big blue boyfriend isn't doing the goo-gathering." - Jessica

"What have you got that's not a dead cat?" - Lara

Austin: "Fuck other people!"
Simon: "What, as opposed to fucking yourself?"
Duncan: "Well, the latter is more fun... uh, wait."

"Can we please stop talking about Uranus rings and gas giants?" - Waynne

Austin: "He has a stamina of -2."
Adrianna: "Well, guess who's on top, then."

"I don't mind the evil, but the lawful bit freaks me right out!" - Lara

"They'll be sorry they messed with us!... Er, no, they'll be dead.... We can leave one alive just so it can be sorry." - Lara

"Tree-licking scum!" - Duncan

"Yeah, it's a horn of ever-blowing. So you blow it, stick it in his pants and run. " - Waynne
"Aren't you supposed to lick Poles or something?... Telephone poles! Telephone poles!" - Austin
"Bugger." - Austin

Vintage quotes for the anniversary edition

Rice expands. - Simon

A grenade launcher launches grenades. - Waynne

RANDOM STUFF

Jesus saves! Everybody else takes damage.

Dungeons and Dragons is a tool of Satan. It's one of his more dorky, socially inept tools though.
(see more of this kinda stuff at www.fstdt.com)

The Top 100 Things I'd Do If I Ever Became An Evil Overlord
1. My Legions of Terror will have helmets with clear plexiglass visors, not face-concealing ones.
2. My ventilation ducts will be too small to crawl through.
3. My noble half-brother whose throne I usurped will be killed, not kept anonymously imprisoned in a forgotten cell of my dungeon.

4. Shooting is not too good for my enemies.

5. The artifact which is the source of my power will not be kept on the Mountain of Despair beyond the River of Fire guarded by the Dragons of Eternity. It will be in my safe-deposit box. The same applies to the object which is my one weakness.

6. I will not gloat over my enemies' predicament before killing them...

More at www.eviloverlord.com/lists/overlord.html

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