

How to Play an RPG Solo

By John Yorio 2015

<http://tabletopdiversions.blogspot.com/2015/01/solo-role-playing-series-part-1.html>

Solo Role-Playing Series Part 1: Introduction

For NaGaDeMon 2014, I set about, for the second time, trying to write about how to play an RPG solo.

Rather than making it into a PDF eventually, I have decided to release it here now, both to help anyone interested in the topic, but also, as a way to refine it based on whatever feedback it might generate.

Playing RPGs (and wargames) solo has brought me hours of enjoyment and I hope that for those who are curious about how to go about it, that I can be of some help towards setting them on the path. For those who already play this way, I look forward to your feedback.

And, now, without further ado:

Introduction

The most common question I get about my solo role-playing activities is "how do you play an RPG by yourself?" This is not only a question driven by assumptions about what it means to play a role-playing game, but, more often than not, people want details, instructions, a guide to follow, so they can do it themselves. There are many tools available to the new solo RPG enthusiast, but surprisingly little is available that illustrates exactly how to put those tools to use.

The most well known solitaire role-playing activity is probably the paragraph-based "Choose your own Adventure"-type. [Tunnels and Trolls](#) has dozens of modules designed in this format, and even Dungeons & Dragons has [solo modules in its past](#). These, enjoyable as they are, are limited to the options presented by the author. The adventure is highly structured; in gaming terms, it's a railroad.

A similar type of game, with more randomness to it, but still a railroad, is a method I call the H.E.X. method. [H.E.X. is a one page RPG](#), freely available at the time of this writing. The adventure consists of encounters that can occur in any order, determined by the roll of the die. The number of encounters exceeds

the count of the die's sides, so that a mechanic to add to the rolls, usually based on successful encounters, is key to the game. In essence, you can't leave until you collect the keys.

Both of those types of solo-games are enjoyable, but the player is reliant on someone else to do the legwork of creating an adventure, if there is to be any amount of surprise. For someone interested in something more like they experience in a group setting, free form gaming is the answer.

Free form gaming comes in two flavors: structured and unstructured.

In the structured game, the events follow a pattern - there is a structure upon which the events hang, but nothing dictates the content of what occurs; it is what some might call, a play ground model. Unlike the railroad, the player has agency within the boundaries of the structure to go and do what they want. Examples of this include using ideas like the [3-Act structure](#), [the hero's journey](#), or more specific to role-playing, [the 5-Room Dungeon model](#) and [John Fiore's 9Q's](#).

The benefit is that, for those who play to tell stories, these games have a satisfying development of the narrative that is not necessarily found in the unstructured game. The unstructured game is as its name implies. This type of gaming is well suited towards games of exploration and discovery, bet it in the dungeons of a pseudo-Western European fantasy world, the icy surface of a distant planet, or the jungles of South America. It is, in gaming terms, sandbox-style play.

I will focus on the latter two options in this document. They require more from the player, but they are more rewarding in the long haul. I will present several tools for your use, but more valuable, I hope, are the walk-throughs of actual plays. The goal is to make it clear how one goes about playing an RPG solo (at least, how I do it), so that those who have been unsure of how to start, can begin their adventures.

Can You Really Play RPGs Solo?

For those new to the idea of solo role-playing, I know it sounds a bit odd. We tend to think of role-playing as something done necessarily with others, as if it's some essential part of the

idea. But, as it turns out, there's nothing essential about the presence of others to role-playing.

At it's core, role-playing is "make believe" and plenty of children demonstrate daily that pretending to be a firefighter, a teacher, a doctor or an anthropomorphic train can be solitary activities. The difference between what children do, and a role-playing game is the rules, however many or few there are.

Finally, for those who believe an RPG must have at least a GM and a player, many indie games have repeatedly illustrated that games can be GM-less, with the role of the GM distributed to the other players.

A Note about Rules Choice

When playing an RPG solo, you have a great deal of latitude when it comes to choice of rules. You are limited only by what you have access to and what appeals most to you, without need to consider what anyone else wants to play. There are very few, if any, role-playing games that cannot be given the solo treatment - even the most rules heavy. At the other end of the spectrum, if you have no rules of choice, it is possible to play a solo role-playing game with no rules at all, other than some of the various systems available here and elsewhere.

If your RPG of choice focuses on gridded surfaces and miniatures in combat, that portion of the game might be better approached as a solo skirmish wargame, with respect to tactical control of your enemy. A great deal has been written regarding solo wargaming, the best known of which is [Donald Featherstone's Solo Wargaming](#), but I also highly recommend a membership in the [Solo Wargamers Association](#), which includes a subscription to Lone Warrior, a quarterly journal dedicated to solo gaming.

Solo Role-Playing Series Part 2: Some Misconceptions We Need to Clear Up

I hesitated to post this next bit mostly because people are probably waiting for something actionable. I'll get there, I promise. Remember, I wrote this as something designed to be a stand-alone publication, separate from my blog. My thought was that, it's possible the reader would be starting from scratch and so I wanted to set down some things that would guide the process. As before, any and all feedback is welcome -

at some point I will probably collate the posts into a pdf, and i'd like the final result to be as helpful as possible.

My underlying assumption for all that follows is this: solitaire gaming does not correspond 1:1 to social gaming. I, and many others, have tried to push against that barrier, and I have yet to see anyone convincingly succeed in duplicating the group play experience in a solitaire tabletop environment. Indeed, I, and, again, others, have come to the conclusion that such a goal is misguided.

While playing solo is similar to group play in many respects, and with some game systems, it might be difficult to tell the difference, the differences are there. Certainly, for those who mistake drinking soft drinks and munching on pretzels with friends as an essential part of role-playing, it is nothing at all like social gaming. Regardless, solo RPGing is best thought of as a wildly different animal.

Primarily, your experience will not be entirely that of a player, but rather, you will be a Player with some Game Master duties. For gamers familiar with certain "indie" RPGs, this is nothing unusual, but for those familiar with only traditional RPGs, this might appear to run up against a long established, sacred, and inviolable duality.

Yet, and I hope this isn't a surprise, there is no law requiring the division of the responsibilities of player and GM, into two different people, despite what your rule books might tell you. This is not to say that we have *carte blanche* when we act as our own Game Master; solo games are not an exercise in creative writing with dedication to a particular story.

If you want to tell a particular story, you are better off trying your hand at writing a short story or even a novel.

While you may write if you play an RPG solo, at least if you keep a journal of your adventures (and I recommend that you do - more on that later), you are, first and foremost, playing a game. Through

the use of randomizers and oracles, liberally mixed with your psychology, the twists and turns will surprise you, often pleasantly, sometimes frustratingly, and take you anywhere but where you thought you would go when you first sat down. Which, as it turns out, is exactly what we want.

Surprise is key to the long term enjoyment of your solo venture; it is what will bring you back to the table again and again. As a word of warning for those who are invariably going to try to develop a complex AI using dice or cards or something else to GM your tabletop experience: that way lies folly. It is an enjoyable exercise, to be sure, but if you insist that a system take the role of GM 100%, then you are better off with purpose designed solitaire adventures or video games, which possess sophisticated AIs beyond duplication with practical mechanical systems.

Wednesday, January 28, 2015

Solo Role-Playing Series Part 3: The Essential Toolbox

When we consider at the bare minimum what a human Game Master does, we can distill out what is essential to have mechanisms or systems for in our solo toolbox.

What, at the bear minimum, does a GM typically do?

- They answer our questions about the game world.
 - *Do I recognize the figure in the trench coat?*
 - *Which political agents are at work in this town?*
- They adjudicate the success of our actions.
 - *I climb the side of the building, do I make it?*
 - *I jump into the rough water and attempt to retrieve the sword from the bottom of the river. Do I succeed?*
- They determine the reactions of others to our character.
 - *I hold up my hands in a sign of peace, how do the orcs react?*
 - *I apologize to the mafia boss for hitting on his wife. Does he accept my apology?*
- They adjudicate conflict, ideally without bias towards a particular outcome.
 - *I offer the merchant 1000 credits for the respirator, does he accept?*
 - *I attack the guard with my sword. Do I hit or cause damage?*

What you should notice almost immediately is that many of these might be handled by your rules of choice.

Conflict is almost always handled explicitly in RPGs, similarly many systems have Skills or Abilities mechanisms that determine if an attempt to do something succeeds or fails. Reaction tables go back to early versions of D&D, and wargaming before that.

Regardless of how much fluff is included, what isn't so common in a rule book are mechanisms to handle questions about the game world.

Many of our questions about the world will be closed questions (yes or no), and while there are a variety of ways to generate the exact answer, most boil down to 50/50 one way or the other.

Open ended questions, such as "What's in the room?" or "What does the guard say?" seem more complicated on the surface.

However, they are more easily tackled, if you invoke your role as the part-time GM.

You might:

- Decide by fiat - arguably the simplest method, but it does little in the way of surprise. However, even here, there are ways to shake things up.
- Consult a randomizer (such as cards or dice) with assigned results to each value. Random dungeon generators and room stocking tables are common examples of this.
 - You can prepare these lists on the fly - using your role as GM to make them more logical and feel less random - or in advance.
- Consult an oracle. Here I mean something that gives a non-literal result for you to interpret - be they pictures, random word lists, tarot cards, etc.

Fiat and randomizers will in part at least, be touched on below, but oracles will merit their own post(s).

Mechanisms to answer our questions about the game world.

A mechanism to adjudicate questions about the game world can also serve to answer questions about the success of our actions, the reactions of others, and adjudicate conflict.

Indeed, with just this one mechanism, and without a set of rules, you can play a solo role playing game. However, if you are using an RPG system, you will probably defer to those rules when the system already provides the means to answer your question.

Type 1: Natural Language to Percentage Chance

Mechanisms of this type have a form like the following:

Adjective	Yes	No
A Sure Thing	01 - 90	91 - 100
Very Likely	01 - 75	76 - 100
Somewhat Likely	01 - 60	61 - 100
50/50	01 - 50	51 - 100
Unlikely	01 - 40	41 - 100
Very Unlikely	01 - 25	26 - 100
Impossible	01 - 10	11 - 100

Now you might quibble about the percentages, but the concept is clear, I hope. You pose your yes/no question, decide which adjective best describes the possibility of the hoped for result, and roll using the appropriate row to interpret the results.

More often than not, you won't know which adjective is the right one, and in that case, go with 50/50.

[Mythic: Game Master Emulator](#), or Mythic : GME, is probably the most well-known example of this kind of Yes/No table. The Mythic results table has more adjectives, and is unusual in that it makes use of an additional attribute which shifts the likelihood of a yes or no result as things go well or badly for your character.

Mythic's table also includes the possibility that either result might be an extreme example. That is to say, if you roll sufficiently poorly, your result becomes a "No, and" and conversely, rolling well can give you a "Yes, and". I highly recommend purchasing Mythic GME as it is a complete method of solo gaming that offers a number of ideas that I will not be covering.

Wargamers who own Too Fat Lardies [Platoon, Forward!](#) will find a similar system to Mythic, without the notion of "Yes, and" or "No, and." Rather than the granular approach Mythic takes with the d100, Too Fat Lardies use a d10 for percentages.

A free product which I rather like, is a system known as [IN-RADIC](#). It can be found here. The author makes use of 2d6 instead of percentile dice but the approach is the same. In addition, he provides an oracle and a set of pulp wargaming rules that can be used as a rules lite RPG as well.

Type 2: 50/50 Systems

These systems avoid the use of varying chances of yes/no and focus only on the 50/50 outcome. As this is probably the most common choice with the Natural Language to Percentage systems, you can be assured they work quite well.

The most obvious method of deciding a 50/50 question is to flip a coin. Perhaps more common among gamers is to roll 1d6, 1-3 = yes, and 4-6 = no, or perhaps, odds = yes, evens = no.

Either of these methods works perfectly well, but with little effort it's possible to add interest to your game's narrative.

Taking a hint from the various bits of advice given to GM's to say "yes, and" or "yes, but", we can use the dice to bring in additional details about the game world, our actions or the actions of NPCs.

Here are three such mechanisms, all based on the ubiquitous d6:

The first method essentially replicates the Mythic-type approach to using yes, no and extremes of both.

1 = "No, and "
2-3 = "No."
4-5 = "Yes."
6 = "Yes, and "

Next, we can add the possibility of getting a Yes or No, but not quite exactly what we bargained for:

1 = "No, and " (Not only no, but extraordinarily so)
2 = "No."
3 = "No, but <something yes-like>"
4 = "Yes, but <something no-like>"
5 = "Yes."
6 = "Yes, and " (Not only yes, but extraordinarily so)

The problem with a straight "yes" or "no" is not unlike the problem with receiving that answer to a question in other day-to-day activities; sometimes it's acceptable, but it's harder to go someplace interesting from that.

So, finally, and my preferred, refinement:

1 = "No, and " (Not only no, but extraordinarily so)
2 -3 = "No, but <something yes-like>"
4-5 = "Yes, but <something no-like>"
6 = "Yes, and " (Not only yes, but extraordinarily so)

An example might make all of this easier to follow.

The Scene:

Inside the tavern, Arnax's eyes take a minute to adjust to the darkness that envelopes the interior despite the bright sun outside. He saddles up to the bar and the bartender says, "what'll you have?"

Does he know where I can find the Old Man Who Gives Out Quests?

I roll 1d6. I get a 1, the result of "No and" on all three tables. I

come up (i.e. made up, decided by GM fiat) with the following:

No, and he says, "If you value your life, you won't ask again."

Notice that the "extraordinarily so" doesn't have to be extreme, but if you want it to be, go for it:

"No, and he pulls a gun and shoots"

Or if surreal and dream-like is your preference:

"No, and he removes his head and punts it to the waitress who takes off running."

What if I had rolled a 2?

The first and second approach would yield a simple "No", which results in "No, he doesn't." Helpful in some respects, but not for driving your game to interesting places.

The third approach could yield something like:

- No, but he says, "There's a kid who comes in here everyday and claims to know him."
- Or No, but he says "For 50 gold crowns I might."
- Or No, but he says "if you drink enough, they say he comes to you in your dreams."

You can see the benefit of the last approach in that, despite the question being a close-ended question, the results drive the game in new directions.

If you prefer, declare exactly what each result will be prior to the rolling of the die, writing it down to keep yourself honest.

So, for example:

1 = No, and he says, "If you value your life, you won't ask again."

2-3 = "No, but there's a kid who comes in here everyday and claims to know him."

4-5 "Yes, but it'll cost you."

6 - "Yes and he nods to a lone figure bent over a table nursing his drink. 'That's him.'"

This approach leads into the next type.

Type 3: Dicing Between Options aka Featherstone's Matrix

This method is similar to the last example, although there are two variations that I want to demonstrate.

The first I call "The Featherstone" and it gets its name to from an idea Donald Featherstone presents for playing skirmish wargames solo. As it turns out, it works equally well with role-playing.

The second variation is what I am labeling the Matrix method, based not on the movie of that name but on Engle's Matrix games. It simply takes the argument resolution method from the Matrix games and uses it for deciding which of several options is, in fact, the case.

The Featherstone:

The Featherstone involves deciding upon the likely outcomes and assigning percentages to each of them, so that totaled, the result is 100%.

A simple yes/no result can be treated as 01-50 and 51-100 ,but you could include the "buts" and "ands" as well.

Does the bartender know where I can find the Old Man Who Gives Out Quests?

01 - 10 = No, and he says, "If you value your life, you won't ask again."

11 - 50 = "No, but there's a kid who comes in here everyday and claims to know him."

51-89 = "Yes, but it'll cost you."

90 - 100 - "Yes and he nods to a lone figure bent over a table nursing his drink. 'That's him.'"

But you could take it further:

01-10 No and he threatens you

11-20 No but he tells you a kid comes in everyday who clamis to

21-30 No but for 50 gold crowns he might

31-50 No but the old man comes by from time to time

51-60 Yes but he's dead.

61-70 Yes, but you'll need a letter of introduction if you want to meet him

71-80 Yes, but it'll cost you 50 gold crowns.

81-90 Yes, but he isn't talking until you order a drink, this isn't a church.

91-100 "Yes and he nods to a lone figure bent over a table nursing his drink. 'That's him.'"

That's a little extreme, but I wanted to demonstrate the possibility that this method opens up. In actual play, 3 or 4 options are plenty, especially for a yes/no question.

Matrix:

The Matrix method is something of a cross between the Mythic method and the Featherstone. Declare your possible outcomes, decide how likely each one is (called the strength of the argument in Matrix terms) and roll. The exact method and table necessary is illustrated [here](#).

You could use the full Matrix method but it is a bit more time consuming to setup, as it is intended for multiple players.

Conclusion:

Obviously, use whichever method most appeals to you, but if you are just starting out, I recommend using:

1= "No, and " (Not only no, but extraordinarily so)
2 -3 = "No, but <something yes-like>"
4-5 = "Yes, but <something no like>"
6 = "Yes, and " (Not only yes, but extraordinarily so)

At first, don't worry about writing things down before you roll - once you find that you like solo gaming, you might not mind the few seconds that takes, but in the beginning, we want the game to move at a good pace to keep your enthusiasm high.

Why this method?

It uses the d6 which in all likelihood, everyone who owns a boardgame already owns. It only provides four outputs, which are quickly and easily generated, and all of the results move the story and the game world forward.

So, roll the dice, go with your gut in terms of the result. Later, you can write things down before you roll, or tweak the results by combining them with oracles or random generators.

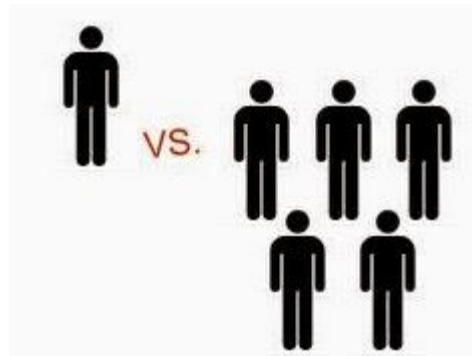
With our method for resolving questions about the game world, and incidentally, the other questions as well, if our rules of choice do not, we're ready to play.

Friday, January 30, 2015

Solo Role-Playing Series Part 4: Playing One Character vs Playing Several

I originally planned to post this as post 3, but changed my mind because I wanted to give people something to play with, dice to roll, etc. So, here's a bit of my thoughts on the question of one character vs a party. Scroll down for the TL;DR in bold.

Also, I have comments to reply to on previous posts. I will do that shortly!



Although the phrase "solo role-playing" might imply that the player takes the role of a single character, the reality is that, in some games, this is not the recommended course - either due to the lethality of the game world to lone characters, or because characters occupy various niches and thus a lone character is ill suited to deal with the variety of common challenges they might encounter.

Both situations are typical in the more popular fantasy games as well as the more realistic, as opposed to cinematic/pulp, military games (think Band of Brothers vs. Sgt. Rock).

If you want to play a solo character, a lone wolf with no team to speak of, for genres or game systems that assume teams of PCs with specializations, then, as the player and GM, you may want to exercise your freedom to alter game play. You can do this either by reducing the level of danger/challenges encountered, focusing on the kinds of challenges that your character is best suited for, or rewrite the rules to reflect your preference.

As an example of the last, I highly recommend checking out the free supplement, [Black Streams \(Solo Heroes\)](#). It uses an ingenious approach to interpreting hit points. As a result, the lone character has an increased chance of success and long term survival, without the need to resort to resort to reduce the difficulty of encounters. Even if you don't play Old School Fantasy games, there is inspiration there to be had.

Without modifying the game so drastically, you can focus on the character's strengths.

If, for example, you are playing a thief in a traditional, class/level fantasy RPG, then the focus could be on committing "jobs", rather than solo looting ancient cyclopean ruins.

This kind of thing can work quite well. Understand that you may need to do some rules tweaking, depending on the game system. For example, in a system where character growth is dependent on combat, a lack of same will hamper character growth, in system terms, if your adventures revolve around intrigue.

If playing that same thief from that traditional, class/level fantasy RPG, you want to raid subterranean lairs, you might decide to scale encounters/challenges. For example, when you are 1st level, rather than the four to eight orcs you might ordinarily expect to meet if you were in a group, you limit the number to 1 or 2.

I have played many enjoyable games this way - I won't call them campaigns because the characters were short lived - and it is well worth a go to see if it works for you. Without a doubt though, some will find it unsatisfying because it doesn't feel like the game they set out to play - either because they have to tweak the rules too much to give their lone hero a chance, or because they really want to play out the exploits of a team.

If that is you, then you will take on other characters - call them NPCs if you like, but of course, they aren't, as there are no non-players in your game - and either treat all of your characters as special snowflakes, or have one main character and treat the rest as secondary.

Special snowflakes are full fledged PCs in their own right, which you the player do your best to run independently of your other characters, while I mean a secondary character as one that supports the goals of your PC, although they too should have some depth, with varying degrees of focus during game play.

In either case, you will find it helpful if these NPCs have at the least their own agendas and one or two character quirks. These you can use to provide narrative color, as well as friction for your main character, if you have one.

The extreme alternative is to treat the secondary characters as 1-dimensional props. These poor souls exist simply to fulfill their role in the group and are easily replaceable, e.g.s. torchbearer, porter, the mercenary, etc. Although, over time, you will undoubtedly find they take on personalities of their own.

Perhaps, surprisingly if you follow The Ever Expanding dungeon, this last approach is my recommendation for the beginning of your solo ventures.

TL;DR: if you are just getting started, stick to one main character. If you need sidekicks/other characters in the group in order to succeed in system terms, treat them as 1-dimensional cannon fodder who dutifully follow non-suicidal orders.

Why?

- Because many people find playing multiple characters difficult, either for characterization, record keeping or some other reason.
- It allows the player to easily use a game intended for a team of characters, without having to tweak the rules.
 - Since D&D (in all its editions and simulacra, including Pathfinder) is the most popular RPG (I don't have the numbers, but I'm pretty sure it's true), and is a team-oriented system, this will be the situation for most people who are trying solo gaming.
- Later, you can develop the secondary characters as much or as little as you wish.

The alternative to all of this, of course, is to reconsider your choice of system.

There are rules sets that support a more Conan, less Lord of the Rings, more Batman and less Justice League adventures.

Games based on source material that regularly features a lone protagonist: superhero, samurai, vampire/werewolf protagonists, etc., or those centered on Lovecraftian horror for instance, more often readily lend themselves to the solo PC. In these genres, the basic assumptions lead to a system that very often requires no adjustment as a result; one investigator is just as likely to go insane investigating Mythos horrors as a group of them.

Solo Role-Playing Series Part 5: Short Example of Play Using Our Toolkit So Far

Returning to the fact that we have a means to answer questions about the world, let's take a look at how this might work out in practice.

In this example, I will use a set of RPG rules and primarily stick to the the [method I recommended previously](#) for addressing questions about the world.

1 yes and
2-3 yes but
4-5 no but
6 no and

One thing we have not discussed is note keeping and journals - I'll get to them but suffice it to say, recording something about your play is a good idea. I like to record notes about the narrative, the mechanics, and my own personal thoughts, and then later write it up in a coherent manner for my blog, but there are many other ways to go about it.

In this case I will do it as I ordinarily do, but I'll show you the whole process here.

First, I need a system and a character.

I'm going to use [Unbelievably Simple Roleplaying](#), and because my ego is boundless, I will use my own [USR: Moldvay Era Classes](#) document to place the game into a fantasy setting. I just read [Wizard of Lemuria](#) and one of the many Conan books is waiting in the wings, so I'll go with a fighter, imagining him more barbarian from the North and less plate-clad knight of a pseudo-Europe.

Lugar of the Frozen Wastes: Action: d10, Wits: d8, Ego: d6. HP: 8 (not terribly impressive - thank goodness this is a one off!) Specialisms: Melee Weapon Mastery (Action + 2), Smashing things (doors, chests, etc.) (Action +2), dodge (action +2)

Don't worry if you're not familiar with the system - it's pretty straight forward. One of the nice parts is that it has a system for handling uncontested attribute tests, for actions that are not automatic successes.

Getting started can be the hard part - later, when I discuss methods for handling open ended questions we'll look at generating these starts randomly.

For now, I decide to rip off [Seven Samurai](#), with a village under threat by bandits.

Also, since this is intended to be a one-shot, I will follow a [5-Room Dungeon model](#), using Scene 1 to set the stage and get the quest, Scene 2 to handle the investigation/travel/roleplay, Scene 3 to be an encounter designed to drain my resources, Scene 4 to be a big encounter, and Scene 5 to be the treasure/reward/or plot twist.

Scene 1:

Note: This is all me acting in my role as the GM. I'm setting up

the first adventure for our protagonist - and it's pretty much a railroad to get here.

Lugar arrived in the village of Argalia, tired and somewhat short of coin. The people eyed him suspiciously - perhaps it was the minimal attire, not more than a loin cloth - and the great sword which swung from his hip. In the tavern, where the only thing that mattered was if he had money to pay for his tab, he found a more welcoming atmosphere. Indeed, there one of the elders of the village approached him and offered him a reward if he would help defend them against bandits who ride down from the hills, steal their harvest, raid their tills, and steal their women. They will probably arrive within the week. With money running short, he accepted.

Heavy handed, sure, but it works.

Scene 2:

The first thing that comes to my mind is that Lugar wants to know if there are any capable fighters in the town that he can use either as a raiding force of his own, or in a defensive way.

In my notes, it looks like this:

Lugar wants to know if any capable fighters in the village . Are there?

I roll a d6 and get a 5. "No, But" and I decide that means that, while there aren't any capable fighters in the village, the people are more than willing to help. In fact, some of the younger men see it as a way to become heroes and advance themselves socially.

My notes: 5 - no but the people are willing to help in any way they can. Young men see this as a way demonstrate their physical strength and courage and to advance socially. They don't understand the threat.

Lacking the possibility of a raiding force, I decide that Lugar examines the village layout and will attempt to identify weak spots and inform the villagers as to how to address them.

My notes: Is Lugar able to determine which areas are the most vulnerable?

I have two options here - I can use the d6 method, or I can look at the rules I am using and treat this as a non-contested attribute check. There is no right or wrong here. Since I would set this at Medium difficulty for his Wits score, that puts success at slightly better than 50/50 (4+ on a 1d8)

My notes: *Wits check. Med. 4+ - 2. Crap.*

Yes, the word crap is in my notes because it popped into my head as soon as i rolled the die and I'll want to remember that when I read my notes later.

Worse, because this is basically a hard "No." answer, I may have painted myself into a corner. So I take on the role of the GM for a minute and note:

Lugar made a check of the village perimeter, attended by a young woman of about 18, hair long and black and skin pale like the snow of his homeland, assigned to take notes on his recommendations. He could scarcely concentrate.

I decide I still need to do more to prepare for a coming raid by the bandits and so Lugar will inquire of the young lady if she knows where and how the bandits enter the town.

My notes: *Does the young woman know where and how the bandits enter town?*

I don't know anything about her - in fact she didn't exist until i needed means to explain away the fact that Lugar noticed nothing he could fix.

I roll a d6 and hope for the best.

My notes: *3 - Yes, but she is afraid to tell him.*

My reaction to this in real life is, "Wait, why is she afraid?"

Just like that, I have less of an idea of what's going on.

My notes: *Is she afraid of spies? 4, no but, she darts her eyes to an old well.*

That popped into my head for no apparent reason, but I could see it plain as day, and so I went with it.

Lugar decides he will try to schmooze her into telling him more.

My notes for this scene look like this:

Is he able to schmooze her for more info? Wits vs Wits.

YoungWoman Wits Stat:

1- d4

2-3 - d6

4-5 - d8

6 - d10

6!

I roll and record the results of his d8 vs her d10:

Lugar: 6, Young Woman: 10

Nope.

Lugar will have a talk with the village elder back at the tavern and see if he knows anything.

Now, let's say my time playing is up there and I have to continue that scene next session. In between, I'd review my notes and write it up as a narrative, interspersed with mechanics because people have repeatedly told me that's what they want to see. If you're doing this in a document that you aren't sharing publicly, you certainly can eliminate the mechanics.

The Write-up:

Lugar arrived in the village of Argalia, tired and somewhat short of coin. The people eyed him suspiciously - perhaps it was the minimal attire, not more than a loin cloth - and the great sword which swung from his hip. In the tavern, where the only thing that mattered was if he had money to pay for his tab, he found a more welcoming atmosphere. Indeed, there one of the elders of the village approached him and offered him a reward if he would help defend them against bandits who ride down from the hills, steal their harvest, raid their tills, and steal their women. They will probably arrive within the week. With money running short, he accepted.

His first inquiry to the elder was in regards to any organized militia or capable fighters among the villagers.

[Are there? 5 - no but the people are willing to help in any

way they can. Young men see this as a way demonstrate their physical strength and courage and to advance socially. They don't understand the threat.]

The old man shook his head, and not without a touch of shame, replied in the negative. Not one to give up easily, Lugar asked if he might be take around the village perimeter to inspect it for weak points.

Later that afternoon, the elder introduced Lugar to a young woman, who would show him around and record his recommendations.

And so, Lugar made a check of the village perimeter, attended by a young woman of about 18, hair long and black and skin pale like the snow of his homeland.

[Is Lugar able to determine which areas are the most vulnerable? Wits check. Med. 4+ - 2. Crap.]

Unfortunately, he could scarcely concentrate, and as a consequence noted no areas of particular concern. Still, he knew he hadn't been concentrating and so made an effort to learn something of the bandits.

"Do you know by what way these curs come?"

[Does the young woman know where and how the bandits enter town? 3 - Yes, but she is afraid to tell him]

Lugar could tell she knew something but she seemed afraid to speak. Lowering his booming voice to a near inaudible whisper he said, "Do you fear spies among your own?"

[Is she afraid of spies? 4, no but, she darts her eyes to an old well.]

Her reply was silence, but she had darted her eyes towards a field. When Lugar looked in that same direction, he noticed an old, dilapidated stone well.

"Woman, you have nothing to fear. I have stood knee deep in the blood of thousands of enemies of this land. My whole life I have devoted to the protection of the old, the weak, and the fair. And you are fairest of all." Lugar laid it on thick in an effort to get her to open up.

[Is he able to schmoozer her for more info? Wits vs Wits.

YoungWoman Wits Stat:

1- d4

2-3 - d6

4-5 - d8

6 - d10

6!

Lugar: 6, Young Woman: 10

Nope.]

It came as no surprise to Lugar that his efforts were in vain; a beautiful woman like her undoubtedly heard lines like these every day and was immune to their intended effect.

Lugar thanked the woman for her time and headed back to the tavern to see if the elder was still there. He had questions that needed answering.

Thursday, February 12, 2015

Solo Role-Playing Series Part 6: Handling Open Ended Questions

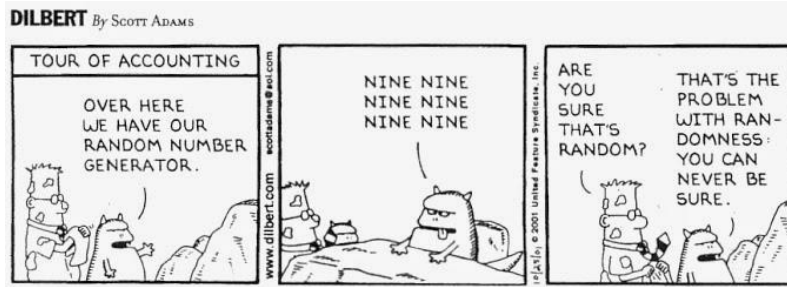
We now resume our regularly scheduled post in this series. For those hoping for some kind of wargaming content, fear not. Painting and playing are happening and I'll post some soon.

Handling Open Ended Questions

It won't be long before you'll start to want a system to fill in the blanks about the world for you, to turn more of the game master role over to a system.

Often the kind of info we are seeking relates to detail - such as personality or appearance - but, it can also be about exact nature of the "scene", the reason for adventure, or contents of a room, for which we have no particular idea or when we feel like our ideas are stale and uninteresting.

Random Generators Are Your Friend



Random Generators allow you to answer these kind of open ended questions and for our purposes there are two types: the first gives concrete results that require little interpretation, while the other is something best described as oracular.

Concrete Result Generators

The first type of generator is akin to the Wandering Monster and Treasure tables in Old School fantasy games. [Random dungeon generators](#) (of which I am enamored) fall into this category as well. Your rules of choice may include many of these, the 1e DMG is chock full, as are more recent releases like [Stars Without Number](#).

Releases like [Ruins of the Under City](#) and [Scarlet Heroes](#) present their own approaches to solo play but you can simply use their tables as part of your own toolkit.

And, of course, many such generators are available online. Among my favorites are:

- [donjon](#)
- [Age of Fables](#)
- [The Dungeon Dozen](#)
- [Chaotic Shiny](#)

Although the result may require further die rolls to determine additional details, these do not require any particular inspiration to generate a usable, game-able result.

In addition to numbered lists to roll on, there are cards and dice that produce specific results that can be commandeered for this purpose, such as the [Pathfinder item decks](#) and [Inkwells Dungeonmorph dice](#).

Nearly every NPC generator contains descriptors of appearance, personality and motivation - Chaotic Shiny is the one I use most often because they often include anachronistic hobbies. Several companies manufacture NPC card decks.

You can embellish the results as desired with further questions posed to your toolkit or with whatever seems enjoyable for the game you are playing, but often the initial result is enough.

For an adventure start, you you might want to check out S.John Ross' [Big List of RPG Plots](#). Either put the plots on index cards (or print and cut up) and draw one at random, or number the list and roll. You'll need to flesh them out, but they're a good way to get your character/s going when you're at a loss for a kick-off adventure.

Behold the Oracle



The second method, I find, is more interesting in that it does not provide a definitive result that two different players would interpret in similar ways.

What I mean is, while gold coins might bring up an image in your head different than mine, we are, more often than not, both thinking of something either of us would recognize as a gold coin.

However, if, for the contents of a chest, we drew cards from a tarot deck and the Fool card came up, it's unlikely we will come up with even close to the same interpretation.

This is the power of the oracle result : even we are unlikely to interpret the result the same way the next time we encounter it.

Tables, dice, cards and online generators are available as oracles, and you can certainly create your own. They feature words, usually abstract concepts, but not always, or images which, if they say 1,000 words as purported, is quite a value at any price.

[Mythic: GME](#) includes two word lists, a Subject and Action list. A roll on each is combined and the player interprets the result. [WilderWords](#) and [Dungeon Words](#) are two of my favorites as they suit the kind of gaming I do often. They do have more concrete results, so I prefer to roll 2-3 times and combine the concepts into one.

Writer's have been using similar tables at least since the 1930s (you can sometimes find these on Etsy or Ebay) for inspiration, plot, and character creation.

As mentioned, tarot cards can be drafted into service in this regard, and there are decks themed to just about everything so you can find one that works best for you. Similarly, many illustrated playing card decks can fulfill this role. Search Etsy.com for a treasure trove of both.

Other divination tools like runes or the I-Ching might work for you as well, as long as the results inspire your brain to make sense out of the result.

Finally, there is, of course, the much ballyhooed [Rory's Cubes](#). If they are not the most popular tool among solo gamers after Mythic: GME, then they are certainly in the top 3.

Rory's cubes are dice with simple, bold icons on them, sold in packs of 9, with several 3-dice per pack supplements. The icons are

clear, and often, not at all obviously related to what you're doing. That said, they push you to think outside of your comfort zone and to come up with interesting bits for your games. They are conveniently available as an app as well for those who prefer that.

The [RPGSolo](#) website has their own set of story cubes available for free - just click on the button marked MAG (for Mark's Adventure Glyphs). These are created specifically for role playing. In fact, the whole site is dedicated to solo roleplaying, incorporating many of the tools already described.

Tip: Mythic suggests something like 10 seconds to figure out what the Subject - Action words mean, and then roll again or just pick something. I find 3 seconds is about my limit before I roll again. Don't get hung up on making the oracle result work. If it's not instantaneous or nearly so, roll/draw again. We want inspiration here, not perspiration.

In the next post, we'll look at some of these in action.

Monday, March 2, 2015

Solo Role-Playing Series Part 7: Our Example Continues, but Now with Open Ended Questions

Admit it, you didn't think I'd get this post on Monday. OK, OK, depending on where you live, I didn't make it but it's still Monday where I live. as I write this. I'm counting it.

[When we last left our hero](#), he was getting nowhere fast with a village lass, and so he had decided to return to the old man in the tavern for more info. You might choose to play these things out in more or less detail, depending on the experience you want to have. Since we're still in scene 2 of the Five Scene Model, I wanted to advance things along a little bit.

I am using the same 1d6 system for Yes/No questions:

1 yes and
2-3 yes but
4-5 no but
6 no and

But I'll be using some oracles as well to illustrate how I might use them.

Scene 2: Continued

Lugar heads to tavern, is the old man still there?

I roll a 2, which is a "Yes, but".

Since he's a village elder, I immediately imagine people come to see him with problems and such and figure the 2 means he's busy. For some unknown reason, I see him as being irritated that Lugar is back so soon.

My notes:

2 - yes but he's busy and seems irritated that Lugar is back.

Lugar isn't keen on being the cold shoulder and demands the old man meet with him if he wants his village protected.

This seems like an Ego vs Ego check but I also noted in my file, *what kind of game is this old man playing?*

I'm suspicious, and while it might be nothing, this will serve as a reminder that there's something about this old guy that might bear investigating.

As for the Ego contest, Lugar has a d6 for Ego, but what about the old man?

Well, he's an old man, and perhaps reflecting my hope that I will be an old man someday (I doubt I'll give out quests but you never know), i'll just assume that makes him wiser than most. Conversely, he is probably not as strong as a younger man, meaning the d10 is not going to be in Action but it might be in Wits or Ego.

My notes:

1-3 Ego is d8

4-6 Ego is d10

4, of course

d10 = 8

I have no reason to roll my d6, i can't beat that.

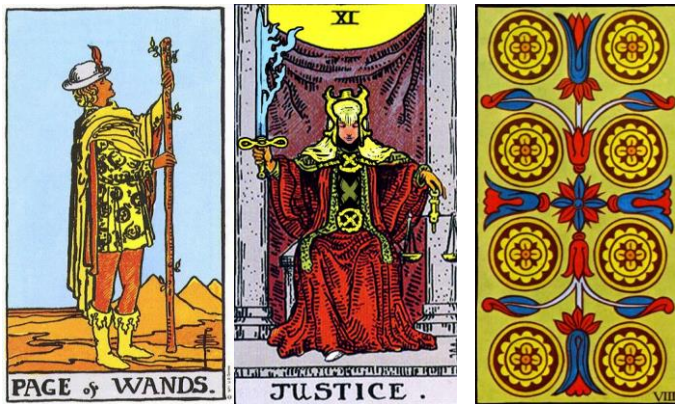
My notes:

Lugar waits for the old man to finish with whatever was keeping him and he finally meets with Lugar to answer his questions.

What does the old man tell Lugar?

An open ended question!

For my first oracle, I decided I'd start with a tarot deck. Not having one handy, I went online and drew three cards for the old man's store: Page of Wands, Justice, 8 of pentacles



In my notes, I record the story the old man tells Lugar, which I generated based on the three images:

The bandit prince was a village son - he was accused of stealing a small sum from a traveling merchant. He claimed it was a demon that had come from an old abandoned well, but no one believed him. He ran away, swearing vengeance on us. Over time he raised an army of from children of the surrounding villages, trained them and himself, and turned to a life of banditry.

Lugar wants to know if there is any truth to the demon story. he asks.

I rolled a 1, to my surprise.

1-yes and it has been our shame ever since.

Of course, I immediately want to know does the demon still haunt the village too?

my notes look like this:

Does the demon still haunt the village?

4 - no but some of the tongue wagglers suggest that it waits for an opportune moment to strike.

Lugar is satisfied with what he has found and finds himself a big tree on the village edge to sleep in - he's short of coin and he can keep watch at night of the village goings on and maybe even catch an early arrival by the bandits.

Scene 3:

In a 5 - room dungeon, this scene is usually some sort of resource drain. it can be a red herring but it doesn't have to be. Since i'm in the mood for some combat i'm hoping to take this scene in that direction, but i will let Rory's cubes have the final say.

How many dice you roll is up to you, but I like 3 dice. It's rare that one of the three results won't be usable and more often, I can use at least 2. Four just seems like too many things to work in:

I get a: *Scissors cutting an envelope, a punch card thingy, and sad face*

I have no idea what to do with this. 3 seconds or less and I roll again: *Foot, Someone looking, Someone shouting*

Immediately, I decide this must mean that Lugar awakens to shouting of some villagers and they are looking for someone or something. Notice, I gave up on the first idea, and it really did little to slow me down. 3 seconds, probably less.

I include some generic phrases in my notes, to help me set the scene in the write up, and then, like a good GM, of course send the thing heading in Lugar's direction:

"Catch him, he went that way"

"No, he's over there!"

Lugar could hear the sound of something crashing through the tall grass, heading in his direction.

But it's dark and I'm not sure what, if anything, Lugar can see.

is he able to see anything?

Because it's dark, i decide to modify the die roll with a +1, which will push the response toward a No value. The best he can hope for is

a "Yes, but" which seems reasonable given the context.

I rolled a 3, which becomes a 4 with the modifier.

4 - No ,but the sound is getting closer.

Lugar steadies himself on his perch into a crouch, struggling to view whatever may be approaching and preparing to pounce regardless.

The thing nears - does it approach close enough for him to jump onto it?

1 - Yes, and it passes right beneath the limb Lugar crouches on - he can't make out the shape exactly but can see the darkness where its body ought to be - he hurls himself at it.

This can be a skill test unopposed, since the thing doesn't seem to know he's there, or it could be an opposed challenge since it is moving.

I like the latter as it will tell me a bit more about what I'm dealing with:.

My notes:

Lugar: d10, rolls a 10

The thing: Action = 1-2 d6, 3-4 d8, 5-6 d10, but on a 6, re roll and on 1 it's a d10, 2-3 d12, 4-6 d16 (maybe it's really strong - and FYI, i made this table up on the spot, just liked I'd do at a table with other people.)

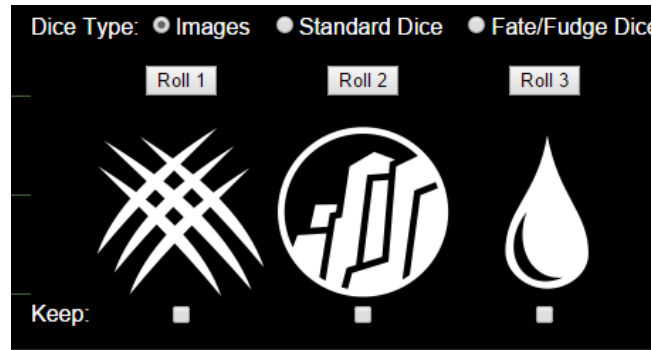
6! son of a!

Followed by a 3. means it has a d12

Fortunately, the d12 comes back with a 1, so Lugar succeeds.

Lugar leaps from his hidden post and brings the thing to the ground

I still have no idea what I've encountered, so I need a way to find out. I could use a wandering monster table, or a monster builder, but I've opted to use [Zero Dice](#):



The crossed claw remind me of X-Men's Wolverine. Perhaps its some mutant humanoid with great claws that has come down from the mountains and while I'm not sure about the droplet, I can only assume it's probably blood. Great

I type up what I'm picturing, so that later, when i do the write up, I won't forget what I had in mind:

The creature, larger than Lugar was man-like in from, but it's face had a twisted animal like quality about it, it's hands seemed to end in elongated steely claws like long spikes. Lugar could see they glistened dimly with a black wetness.

FIGHT!!!

I'll just copy/paste my notes here:

Initiative:

Lugar: Actions + Wits: 6

*wits: 1-2 d6, 3-4 d-8, 5-6
d10, 6 of course*

Creature: d12 + d10 = 8

The creature strikes at him: d12, 7

Lugar rolls his defense, he has dodge so he gets +2:6

1 pt of damage gers though, Lugar is down to 7

Lugar draws his sword and swings

wait, is he able to do so? yes, but it catches enough to void his attack this round

Next round: (rolling again is not the default in USR)

The creature attacks again: $d12, 8$
Lugar dodges $d10+2, 4$
So **FOUR POINTS GET THROUGH!** he's down to 3

Lugar swings: $d10+2, 12!$
 $d12 + 2$ (i assume a clearly predatory creature like has some sort of bonus for sharp reflexes): 2, so 4
It takes 8 points of damage!

How many hp does it have?

If you have read any of the Ever Expanding Dungeon, you probably know I have an entire system for maintaining surprise for hit points, but I haven't introduced that here yet. For now, let's just do it the old fashioned way.

I roll the thing's hp: $A+W: d12+ d10 = 6$
WOOO!!

The creature roars as it collapses in a bloody puddle at the barbarian's feet.

As always the "WOOO!!!!" is in my notes.

At this point I would write the narrative up, but I'm going to stop here or I won't make my self-imposed deadline!