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Rewarding Roleplaying

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Rewarding Roleplaying

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DM's Introduction

Are you a DM who wants a little more *oomph* from your players? Do they need some incentive to play their roles with more feeling? Even if your players are *bona fide* thespians, there's likely still room for improvement. But how?

Many DMs award extra XP for "good role-playing" during gaming sessions. This can be a fine thing to do, but in my experience these rewards tend to be inconsistently awarded and most often follow the Squeaky Wheel Maxim[1]. In worst case scenarios, "good roleplaying" XP awards may hurt feelings. What seemed like a good idea may turn out not being very fun, and what's the point of playing a game if you're not having fun?

If I've learned nothing after more than a decade as a classroom teacher, I've learned that praise and rewards best motivate desired behavior. For rewards to be most effective, they need to be tangible and linked to specific criteria. The latter is key. Tangible criteria put the burden of success on the one seeking the reward.

Rewarding Roleplaying uses three criteria to encourage and reward better roleplaying. Best of all, the responsibility for establishing these criteria belongs to the players. They set their own roleplaying goals. When they meet their goals, you the DM hand out the reward in the form of an Action Point, which is then used by the player to achieve greater levels of success in the game.

Player's Introduction

You've created a character for the game. Your character has stats and abilities and all sorts of bonuses, skills, and feats. Clever use of these statistics during gameplay is key to your character's success and acquisition of XP, wealth, and magic items.

But what about personality? After all, you are a roleplayer, which means you need a role to play during the game. Most players write up a background and define their characters' personalities, often with reference to game features like alignment or allegiances. Such details certainly make the game more enjoyable, but do they have any impact your character's success? Does roleplaying specifically help your character acquire more XP, wealth, or magic items? If your games are like most of mine over the past two decades, the answer is, at best, "Not really."

Wouldn't it be nice if there were criteria by which your character could receive specific rewards that aided your character's in-game success doing those heroic, exciting things that adventurers so often do?

As noted above, *Rewarding Roleplaying* uses three criteria to encourage and reward better roleplaying. Best of all, the responsibility for establishing these criteria belongs to the players.

You set your own roleplaying goals. When you meet your goals, the DM hands out the reward in the form of an Action Point, which you use to achieve greater levels of success in the game.

Comments? Suggestions?

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1 The Squeaky Wheel Maxim states that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. In RPGs, this can be seen when the loudest, most insistent player gets the lion's share of the DM's attention.

Fides

What does a character believe? How does this belief influence a character's actions, especially as an adventurer?

A character's motivating beliefs are his *fides*[2] (pronounced fee-days). Using *fides* during gameplay adds to the social contract between the players (including the DM). The player defines his character's *fides* before the game begins. The DM implements opportunities for *fides* to be challenged during the game. A character can earn one Action Point per game session per *fides*. The only requirement is that the character is played in such a way that he acts based on his *fides.*

Note that there are no requirements that *fides* strictly dictate the way a character acts. People act contrary to their beliefs all the time. The sole requirement is that the character be roleplayed with reference to his *fides*. Let's look at an example:

> Jeremiah Dawes believes that no insult should be left unanswered. He undertakes a diplomatic mission to a group of Wampanoag halflings who are blocking passage along an important river. During dinner with the chief, a warrior insults Dawes's motives. How does Dawes react to the challenge to his *fides*? Does he...
>
> ...return insult for insult, possibly turning dinner into an ugly verbal altercation?
>
> ...demand satisfaction in the form of duel?
>
> ...attack the abrasive warrior?
>
> ...swallow his pride and bottle his anger so as to not endanger the mission?
>
> Any of these reactions is an appropriate response to the *fides* challenge. Undoubtedly other possible responses exist. In each instance, Dawes reacts based on his *fides* and an Action Point is earned.

A player can define as few or as many *fides* as he and the DM can agree upon. Of course the DM shouldn't be expected to work challenges for all of every character's *fides* each game session; however, it is reasonable that each character be given at least one *fides* challenge per game session.

As a character develops, his *fides* may change. The player can add new ones, get rid of old ones, or change existing ones. This works especially well when *fides* change due to the character's experiences during the game.

Naturae

Fides aren't the only things that shape personality. They might not even be the most important or revealing. A character may also have one or more *naturae* (pronounced nat-oor-eye), or instincts. *Naturae* represent those things a character does without much conscious thought in response to a particular situation. Like *fides*, the player writes his character's *naturae* prior to the game's start. The player creates as many *naturae* as he and the DM can agreeably define. *Naturae* are different from *fides* in three ways.

2 You might be wondering, "What's with all the Latin?" Well, I paid for two semesters of Latin in college, and I'm still trying to get my money's worth. Plus, I think Latin is neat.

First, the DM doesn't need to specifically tailor scenarios to regularly include an opportunity for *naturae* to come into play. Also unlike *fides*, a character can earn an Action Point each time his *naturae* come into play, but no more than once per scene[3]. Finally, a character earns an Action Point only for acting the way his *naturae* says he acts.

This reflects the crucial distinction between *fides* and *naturae*. *Fides* result from reflection and conscious decision. *Naturae* are reactions, more or less automatic responses that the character has less control over. Of course, this doesn't mean that *naturae* dictate action. A character may act contrary to his *naturae*. He just doesn't earn an Action Point for doing so. Let's look at an example:

> Jeremiah Dawes doesn't lie. He is instinctively truthful. While traveling through the woods near Jamestown, he and his companions stumble across a dwarven slave escaped from a nearby plantation. They agree to help the slave get out of Gloucester Territory to where the dwarf has a chance of remaining free. Along the way north, the party encounters a gang of slave hunters. The lead slaver hunter asks, "Have you seen any escaped slaves?" What does Dawes do? Does he...
>
> ...admit they have seen an escaped slave?
>
> ...keep his mouth shut and let someone else do the talking?
>
> ...lie to the slave hunters?
>
> Any of these options are acceptable, but only the first one earns the character an Action Point.

A character's *naturae* may also evolve over time. He may develop new ones, change old ones, and even lose specific *naturae* entirely. As always, these changes work best if they occur in response to the character's experiences during gameplay.

Metae

At the start of each adventure (not game session), a player may define one *meta* (plural *metae*, pronounced may-tuh or may-tie if plural) for his character. *Metae* are goals, but they must be something different than the adventure's main objective.

Even moreso than *fides* and *naturae*, it is imperative that the DM be involved in defining *metae* since it is the DM's responsibility to make sure each character's *metae* are included in the adventure. For this reason, *metae* must be defined prior to the start of an adventure. After the first adventure, it is best to define *metae* at the end of the current adventure so that they are ready by the next adventure's beginning.

When the opportunity to achieve a *meta* arises, the character earns an Action Point as long as he reacts accordingly. Success is not a criterion for earning a *meta*-related Action Point. The only thing that counts is effort. Let's look at an example:

> Jeremiah Dawes wants to become a member of a Wompanoag halfling tribe sorcerer lodge. He needs to earn the approval of a sorcerer lodge elder and pass the initiation test. After the successful completion of the diplomatic mission to the negotiate free travel on an important river, Dawes gets his opportunity.
>
> Succeed or fail, Dawes earns an Action Point for seizing the opportunity to achieve his *meta*.

It is entirely appropriate for a character's *meta* to change each adventure, especially if the character achieved his *meta* when he had the chance.

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3 What's a scene? Well, that's hard to say. A scene is a part of a larger adventure, usually focusing on one specific part of that adventure. It's up to the DM to define the scenes in any given adventure.

Summary of Roleplaying Action Points

A player can earn one Action Point for:

1. Roleplaying with reference to his *fides*, earning one Action Point per *fides* per game session.
2. Roleplaying according to his *naturae*, earning one Action Point per *natura* per scene.
3. Attempting to accomplish his *meta*, earning one Action Point per adventure.

Action Points

You've read about how Action Points can be earned during gameplay through a character's *fides, naturae*, and *metae*, but what exactly is an Action Point and what do they do? Also, since I've used Latin for other terms, why not here as well?[4]

An Action Point is a resource that can be spent to affect the game in a variety of ways. There are three effect categories: Character Effects, Combat Effects, and Die Roll Effects. Different uses of Action Points have different rules, but one rule always applies:

You cannot spend more than one Action Point per round per effect category.

At the start of each adventure (not each game session), a character gets one Action Point. He gains more Action Points during gameplay depending on his is *fides, naturae*, and *metae*. A character cannot have more than six Action Points at any given time. Excess Action Points are converted automatically to Action Dice (see below).

At the end of an adventure (not game session), a character may trade in unused Action Points for XP. The character gets (character level x 25 XP) per Action Point. Alternatively, the character may bank unused Action Points for his next adventure.

Other Ways to Earn Action Points

It is recommended that at the start of each adventure, each character be given one Action Point. Furthermore, at the end of each scene in the adventure, each character should be given one more Action Point. These Action Point rewards are in addition to Action Points earned from roleplaying.

Category 1: Character Effects

➔ *Activate Class Ability:* A character can spend one Action Point as a free action to gain another use of a class ability that has a limited number of uses per day. For example, a monk might spend one Action Point to gain another use of her stunning fist ability, or a paladin might spend one Action Point to make an additional smite attack.

➔ *Emulate Feat:* At the beginning of a character's turn, he may spend one action point as a free action to gain the benefit of a feat he doesn't have. He must meet the prerequisites of the feat. He gains the benefit until the beginning of his next turn. For two Action Points, the character gains the benefit of the feat for the duration of the current encounter[5].

4 The simple reason is I didn't like the way "Action Point" read when translated into Latin.

5 What's an encounter? Well, that's also hard to say. An encounter is part of a scene. The most common kind of encounter is a combat encounter, but other activities can count as encounters. It's ultimately up to the DM to define when an encounter begins and ends.

➔ *Spell Boost:* A character can spend one action point as a free action to increase the effective caster level of one of his spells by two. He must decide whether or not to spend an action point in this manner before casting the spell. For two Action Points, a character can increase the effective caster level of a spell cast from a scroll.

Category 2: Combat Effects

➔ *Immediate Attack:* When a threatened foe takes any standard, move, or full round action, a character can spend one Action Point as an immediate action to make an immediate melee attack against that foe. He makes the immediate attack at his full normal attack bonus -- even if he's already attacked in the round. An immediate attack "interrupts" the normal flow of actions in the round. If an immediate attack is taken, immediately resolve it. Then continue with the next character's turn (or complete the current turn, if the immediate attack was taken in the midst of another's turn). This Action Point use replaces normal attack of opportunity (AoO) rules.[6]

➔ *Boost Defense:* A character can spend one Action Point as a free action when fighting defensively or using total defense. This gives him double the normal benefits of the selected action. Thus, a character using this option to fight defensively would take a -4 penalty on all attacks in a round to gain a +4 dodge bonus to AC for the same round. If he used total defense, he would gain a +8 dodge bonus to AC for 1 round.

➔ *Extra Attack:* During any round in which a character takes a full attack action, he may spend one Action Point as a free action to make an extra attack at his highest base attack bonus. Action Points may be used in this way with both melee and ranged attacks.

➔ *Extra Move Action:* As a free action, the character may spend one Action Point to gain an additional move action that round.

➔ *Negate a Condition:* As a free action, a character can spend one Action Point to negate any one of the following conditions: dazed, dazzled, fatigued, shaken, sickened, or stunned. The condition is negated at the beginning of the character's turn.

➔ *Negate a Critical:* As free action even if it's not his turn, a character can spend one Action Point to negate a critical hit scored on him by an opponent. This decision must be made before damage is announced.

➔ *Parry:* If a character is engaged in melee, he may spend one Action Point as an immediate action to parry his opponent's melee attack. On the opponent's turn, before the opponent makes his attack roll, the character announces his intention to parry. Against that single attack, the character gains DR against that attack equal to 1/2 his BAB (minimum DR 1/-). If his is parrying with a buckler or shield, add the shield's AC bonus (including any enhancement bonus) to the amount of DR. If he has DR from another source, the DR from parry stacks with his highest applicable DR.

➔ *Stabilize:* Any time a character is dying, he can spend one Action Point to become stable at his current hit point total.

Category 3: Die Roll Effects

➔ *Action Dice:* For one Action Point, a character can add two Action Dice to his Dice Pool. When the players makes any d20 roll, he can spend any number of Action Dice on that roll, up to the number of Action Dice in his Dice Pool. Each Action Die adds 1d6 to his d20 roll (including attack rolls, saves, checks, or any other roll of a d20) to help the character meet or exceed the target number. He can declare the use of Action Dice to alter a d20 roll after the roll is made, but only before the DM reveals the result of that roll. He can't use Action Dice to alter the result of a d20 roll when taking 10 or taking 20.

➔ *Confirm Critical:* As a free action, a character can spend one Action Point to confirm a critical hit without needing to roll for confirmation.

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6 The AoO rules slow down combat. My solution: Toss them in favor of this AP option. Now, when a player asks, "Does the monster's action provoke?" the answer is, "Do you have an AP?"

➔ *Second Chance:* As a free action, a character can spend one Action Point to make a "second chance" saving throw or SR check on the round after the one in which he was affected due to a failed saving throw or SR check against an ongoing (not instantaneous) effect.

About Actions and Action Points

Using an Action Point as a free action must take place on your turn unless otherwise noted. Using an Action Point as an immediate action can be performed at any time - even if it's not your turn.

Using an immediate action on your turn is the same as using a swift action and counts as your swift action for that turn. You cannot use another immediate action or a swift action until after your next turn if you have used an immediate action when it is not currently your turn (effectively, using an immediate action before your turn is equivalent to using your swift action for the coming turn). You also cannot use an immediate action if you are flat-footed.

Elite and Solo Monsters

Monsters and NPCs don't get Action Points. The DM has enough bookkeeping to do without adding another type of point to stat blocks. Two special types of creatures, however, do receive Action Dice as well other special modifiers. These modifiers are designed to make certain creatures more formidable against a party of armed, violent adventurers.

Elites

Elite creatures are typically the most noteworthy creature in any encounter mix. Frequently, the elite creatures are the leaders in any particular encounter, but this is not necessary. For example, you could have a band of goblins accompanied by a single elite worg.

An encounter can have more than one elite creature, but elites should always be outnumbered by lesser creatures. To create an elite creature:

- Double the creature's listed hit points.
- Give the creature with 2 Action Dice. These Action Dice function as described above[7].
- Do not adjust the creature's CR.

You can "create" elites on the fly, as needed. If the PCs are having a particularly easy time with a particular encounter, you can make a creature elite halfway through! Your players will not know if a creature is elite until you spend an Action Die.

Conversely, if you've planned an encounter with an elite and things are going badly for the PCs, you can cut the elite's hit points in half, and/or eschew your Action Dice.

Solos

Solo creatures are the most fearsome monsters the PCs will ever face. Solo creatures, by definition, must be encountered alone. Solos have abilities specifically designed to allow them to overcome the "economy of actions" and compete against a party of adventurers. If allies arrive to assist a Solo creature, downgrade it to an elite. To create a solo creature:

7 If you're using *Fencing & Firearms* and having the players roll all the dice, this isn't quite accurate. Instead of an Action Die adding 1d6 to a d20 roll, it subtracts 1d6 from any d20 roll made by one player. Either way, announce the use of Action Dice before the rolls are made.

- Multiply its hit points by the number of PCs it is facing (e.g. four PCs, 4 x hit points)
- Start the creature with 2 Action Dice per PC it is facing. These Action Dice function as described above.
- Do not adjust the creature's CR.

Just as with elites, creatures can gain or lose their solo status as you see fit, depending on the needs of the encounter. Certainly, if a solo is not fighting alone, you should reduce it to elite status.

When you create a solo by increasing its hit points, create one normal hit point pool for each PC, with the creature's normal number of hit points in each pool. If a PC drops, scratch off that entire chunk of bonus hit points unless doing so will render the solo unconscious or dead.

The Action Deficit

Even with the modifications above, a solo creature still faces one major disadvantage: the action deficit. The creature gets two actions per round compared to two actions per round per enemy that the solo faces. You can help offset this disadvantage with the following special ability:

Extra Action (Ex) Once per round at initiative count minus 10, the solo gets a single extra standard action. If the adjustment reduces the initiative court for the extra action to zero or less, the solo forfeits its extra action that round. For example, if the solo's initiative roll totals 15 it gets to act normally at 15 and then gets an extra standard action at 5[8].

8 If your group doesn't roll initiative every round, just roll 1d20 and subtract 10 each round.

Action Points Quick Reference Page

Character Effects	
Activate Class Ability	Gain a free use of an ability that has a limited number of uses per day.
Emulate Feat	Gain the benefit of a feat until the beginning of your next turn.
Spell Boost	One spell takes effect at caster level +2.
Combat Effects	
Immediate Attack	Attack threatened foe with melee attack.
Boost Defense	Double the normal benefits of fighting defensively.
Extra Attack	With full attack, make an extra melee or ranged attack.
Extra Move Action	Gain an additional move or move-equivalent action.
Negate a Condition	Negate dazed, dazzled, fatigued, shaken, sickened, or stunned.
Negate Critical	Negate a critical hit scored on you.
Parry	Gain DR against a single attack.
Stabilize	Become stable at your current hit point total.
Die Roll Effects	
Action Dice	Add two Action Dice to your Dice Pool.
Confirm Critical	Confirm your critical hit without needing to roll for confirmation.
Second Chance	Make another save or SR check on the round after an ongoing effect.

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