
Sword & Sorcery Short Story Now!

Contributed by Antti
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Or how we learned to play Hyborian Adventures with Dust Devils.

And how it was different from what I imagined it would be.

Before we started to play the game, I made some vague promises (or described the gameplay very vaguely at least) to be only moderately intra-team confrontational. Well, that's how I imagined it. On retrospect, it was a pretty bad judgement. I also anticipated that I could have lots of Dust Devils conflict action just from putting the players in a situation and watching it play out. I even thought that we wouldn't need that much 'conventional' role-playing scenes (my character says this etc.) from the game to work. Wrong again, even though I think that the interplay between regular rpg scenes and conflicts is not explained very clearly in the Dust Devils book.

So the first two sessions were okay, but the lot of us were just feeling around, trying to make sense of how to use the rules of Dust Devils to produce something valuable. Then a couple of things happened at the same time: We as players felt that we had 'gotten' the system and the excitement that comes from the five-card draws in Dust Devils and I started to read actual play reports of Dust Devils in the Forge.

Actual play reports are essentially what the title says: Someone plays the game and writes a free-flowing report of it to the Forge forum. What helped me a lot was the GM explaining his/her intentions and how she tried to implement those, along with other players' responses to those intentions and the results of them. In future, I plan on reading a couple of Actual Play reports before running any new indie rpg. Reading the book does not usually describe the system well enough to understand its intricacies and those reports can really allow me understand more about how the game can be played.

So, what did I get in this particular occasion? The point that was made in discussions after the reports was that to make Dust Devils go bang is to have a couple of strong NPC's and let them wreck some stuff. And then let the player(character)s to react to that. So simple and that is what I've tried to do. I did have an explosive situation planned for the players to experience, but what it needed was some people to be ready to blow something up. And as the NPC's started kicking some ass the players followed suite. I could even say that the players started kicking some ass at the moment the NPC's seemed like wanting to do that too.

What we've struggled in somewhat is tying the characters' stakes (devils in DD) to the situation. We have done some successful in-game connections as the events have progressed, but I think we could have had more even at the beginning, as the Dust Devils system does not cater for character spotlight scenes. We could have had a brainstorming session along the character creation where players could have elaborated on thir devils and the kinds of themes they

wanted to explore, but I'm not sure how productive that would have been or how to conduct that kind of thing successfully.

I was also pretty vague about the theme and the main point of the game, as already I said in the beginning of this post. I was optimistic that the game system along with some strong player characters should do the trick of scope selection, but in retrospect I was wrong. Ad hoc improvising is not the forte of Dust Devils in all cases, maybe if we played a game like the Shadow of yesterday it would have worked better, but also resulted in a longer game. A stronger framing on theme, setting and type of the story could have helped, whether it was through negotiation or GM decisions. Next time I'll be sure to tighten the scope a lot.

Findings

The title of this post is a combination of 'short story' and story now, a (n indie) rpg principle I like very much. For me Story Now! means that you are supposed to dig in to the most important aspects and possibilities of your character right from the start of the story. That is, instead of having to grind your way through countless dungeons killing mice and miniature bats to gather enough experience and treasure to be that hero you always wanted to be.

It also involves actively tweaking both the setting and the characters to fit each other better. This means that the GM (or Dealer or whatever) has to take the player-created characters and especially their stakes into account when framing scenes and providing opportunities. But for me this also requires the players to 1) actively communicate what they are interested about in their character, 2) actively seek npc's, events that and actions that explore their and other players' characters' stake (and even point out to other players when they are missing a delicious chance to do something wacky/cool/tragic) and 3) inform the other players (including the GM) when they are trying to pull the wrong string on their character (suggesting an alternative course of events is always preferable to just saying no to other players' suggestions, as per the improv rules).

This should ensure that the characters stay in the middle of the story and can't just hop along for the ride. If anyone isn't interested with what is happening right now, it's maybe better to create another starting point and go from there than to drag the thing on and on.

And, BTW, we had a real sucker of a session last night, so the alternative title I provided in the beginning might not apply, at least for me. It was one of those nights when each of my (the dealer's) decisions seemed to kill a little part of the soul of the story. I hope that it was at bad as it can get and won't happen again soon. I have really enjoyed being the Dealer in this game, but last session was a real humbling experience.