
What to Decide When Starting a New RPG?

Contributed by Antti
Wednesday, 18 June 2008
Last Updated Thursday, 19 June 2008

I've recently pondered starting a new rpg. Our Hyborian adventure Kingdoms in Flames is eventually going to come to an end and I would like to start some face-to-face gaming stuff in Helsinki too. I've got two ideas that I'll discuss later, but for now I'm gonna thnk about what should be decided by the gaming group before starting the game. This of course is a reaction to my own ponderings on the successes and failures in the Hyborian game.

The other influence was a conversation with a friend on my on the drive to our friend's summer cottage (and back). He was thinking of a new game of his and looked for me on advice to construct (or choose) a working system for it. After the conversation I spotted the following written by Marshall Burns on Story Games (<http://www.story-games.com/forums/?CommentID=150542>) paraphrasing Vincent Baker on Forge and Anyway:

"I love the way that Vincent has broken down System, on the Forge and (mostly) on Anyway, to the way that you answer two questions:

- What should I contribute to the game?

- How should I treat my fellow players' contributions?

When everyone knows the answers to those questions for THIS group, for THIS game, for THIS session, then you've got a real type of thing goin' down."

This is kind of the basic level of the system. More specifically, in planning a game, I (should) look also at these kinds of questions (which are of course related to the previous ones):

- What is the theme of the story?

- What is the style of the story?

-
What is the general structure of the story we are going to create?

-
for example, the kinds of scenes, sessions and production seasons in PTA

In my opinion, all of these have to be clear and unambiguous within the group before starting the game. The GM does not have to decide all of them by himself, but in our group(s) it seems best that he lays down most of the restrictions.

Theme, as you already know, means what is the game about. This is especially important in these so-called indie rpgs as the system in these games is geared so that the system tries to guide the play towards the theme in many ways. So the theme and system go together. Examples are the characters' devil traits in Dust Devils and characters' issues in PTA.

The style of the story is best described with examples. When playing a Star Trek Next Generation game, for example, this should be self-evident as most players will be familiar with the ST:TNG style. Any other fiction references are possible and often helpful. This does not often have a straightforward counterpart in the system, but instead sets a set of limitations and pointers for players to use when they get their turn to narrate parts of the story.

The structure is the part where I as a player see that the system could help the most. Simply put, clear rules about scene framing and story arcs can really help the players to concentrate on playing. The structure needs to fit with the general idea of what kind of story the players are trying to create as well as time constraints. Scene framing can help move the plot forward (in PTA, player can simply request a plot scene for her character) or fulfill other needs a player has for the story (It would be cool if this would happen now!). And plot arc related rules (this plot must be resolved in this session as this session represents one part of a tv series) help to keep all players' eyes on the ball.

From these general guidelines the group (ok, the GM in most groups) can go on selecting or designing the rule system to use. The answers to the system-related questions that Vincent Baker (through Marshall Burns) provided tell what kind of interaction the group wants to see around the gaming table and how the overall structure of playing the game should be organized.

The questions were formed as "should" questions in the Story Games thread but for player group preferences they should be thought as "want to" questions. If players want to provide more to the story than just play the player characters in the traditional sense of role-playing, some kind of shared story-telling mechanics need to be used. If the players want to be able to adjust or amend other people's story generation, mechanics for that need to be in place.

The story-oriented questions take the mechanical considerations into another level. They tell the players/designers the detailed result. The difficult part is to verify if the mechanics developed / choosed fulfill those requirements. Fortunately we have a wealth of these kinds of mechanics in the existing indie rpgs and a lot of actual play reports for which to determine what kind of play experience and/or story can emerge from using those mechanics.

Another question that I haven't mentioned yet is perhaps the most basic one. It is connected to the scenes and conflicts that the play should consist of. It is, simply put: What will the main characters be doing in the game fiction? This is tied to the story the players want to tell/enact. For example in a mystery game, the characters will be investigating and trying to solve a mystery (Gumshoe). In a horror story, the players fight to stay alive and sane and their mutual differences will result in deaths or tragedies.

The system must involve an interesting way of resolving these actions. Furthermore, it must tie these basic actions to the theme and plot of the game. Theme is usually tackled by character stats and end-conditions for individual characters. Plot is usually left to the players but limitations and conflict-related outcomes can guide the players to the right directions. A good example of this is one basic rule of conflict-resolution where the character always succeeds what he aims to (thus moving the plot forward), but creating hurdles appropriate for the story if the player performs poorly.

A quick recap of all the questions:

- What should I contribute to the game?
- How should I treat my fellow players' contributions?
- What is the theme of the story?
- What is the style of the story?
- What is the general structure of the story we are going to create?
- What will the main characters be doing in the game fiction?

Okay, would those be the things you would think about when starting a new RPG? Are there other things you've found out to be good to decide before starting?

