

Rational Behavior

Golden Heroes Campaign Ratings – A Useful Game System, by Pete Tamlyn



One of the greatest failings of role-playing game designs to date has been their handling of conflicts between Character Reality, that is that which the *character* knows and is able to do, and Player Reality, that which the *player* knows and is able to do. Most game systems are competent enough when it comes to simulating character activities such as combat and spell casting which cannot easily be undertaken by the players as they sit around the gaming table, but as soon as an activity appears which the players can do for themselves without leaving their seats then grey areas appear in the rules and systems break down. Consider, for example, the act of negotiating with an NPC merchant or solving a riddle found in a dungeon. Is it the player or the character whose abilities govern the success of such activities? Which one should it be? If the character then does the game system provide for this, and does your GM run it that way or has he abandoned that particular system as unworkable?

Before we look at ways of solving these problems, let us

take a quick trip through the different sorts of situations that need regulating and the attempts that have been made in the past to cope with them. As I deal with the various problems I hope to show how each one is the result of confusion between Player Reality and Character Reality and the inadequacy of the game systems in dealing with such conflicts.

We will start with a well worn subject, the *D&D* Alignment system. Alignment, in essence, is a means of measuring the personal philosophy of the character and thereby regulating relationships between characters on the assumption that people will tend to get on best with people who share the same sort of approach to the world. The system breaks down in two ways. Firstly, a person's view of life is a very deep, ingrained feature of his psychological make-up. It takes a very good actor to play a character whose alignment is genuinely different to his own in a consistent and believable manner and, other than a few simple, stereotypical guidelines, the game sys-

tem gives the players no assistance. Other than attacking opposing factions on sight, all alignment governed activities occur as part of the conversation between players and GM and are thus susceptible to the influences of Player Reality. Second, there is no satisfactory means of relating a character's behaviour to the alignment system. Many tens of articles have been written over the years debating whether or not players should be docked experience points for 'out of alignment' play, whether the GM should forcibly change a character's alignment if he is behaving inappropriately, or whether the whole system is a complete disaster and ignoring it has no significant effect on the game anyway. Game mechanics exist, at least in part, as a means of simulating character behaviour so that, by putting character actions in at one end and perhaps adding a randomising factor, the GM can get sensible and believable results out of the other end. Even the 3x3 alignment matrix of *AD&D* is a very clumsy and inflexible simulation.

Intelligence, and character

knowledge in general, is a problem in all forms of RPG, but probably more so in modern day and SF games because the breadth of possible knowledge is much greater and the likelihood of players having the appropriate knowledge similarly increased. A GM who gets lumbered with a player who is an expert on the subject of Bronze Age weapon manufacture or the tracking of game in tropical rain forests can count himself unlucky, but watching a group of university students play *Traveller* can make you wonder how GMs ever cope. The engineers are in clover because the sort of practical scientific problems that face you when your space ship crashes on an unknown planet are not too far removed from the sort of thing they are being trained for: repair the engine, patch up the hull and find some means of rigging a launch platform if you need one. Pure scientists are a bit more pushed to take advantage of their background, but when something does crop up that is in line with their speciality their knowledge can be so far in advance of what the

GM knows that they more or less take over the game. Anyone without any form of scientific training is at a severe disadvantage, especially if he is the GM! In such situations there are very few ways to sort things out. In theory it should be possible to appeal to the players to respect the Intelligence and Education requisites of their characters and not say anything that their character wouldn't know or be able to work out. In practice, especially if the party is in a tight corner, the GM often has to either shrug his shoulders and let events take their unnatural (in Character Reality) course or he has to order the players to ignore what has just been said. Neither solution is very satisfactory.

In certain games, particularly the Superhero based ones though *Bushido* has a very similar problem, the character are expected to follow certain codes of behaviour; they are heroes and their moral code is laid down for them rather than being optional as it is in *D&D*. Some games rely on simply exhorting players to behave and encouraging GMs to punish them if they do not, but mechanisms have been designed to regulate situations where the player's behaviour would be seen as a gross violation of the character's code of honour. *Marvel Super Heroes* allows the GM to reward and penalise players through the allocation of 'Karma Points' which may be used to modify die rolls. Anything from kissing babies to capturing villains can get a Karma reward; demolishing buildings and killing people causes Karma loss. As a carrot and stick mechanism it works quite well, but the justification for it in Character Reality is a bit thin. Why should a player be able to add ten to his roll to hit because his character helped an old lady across the road? *Bushido* uses a more traditional definition of the word Karma in that correct behaviour in this (character) life is rewarded in the (player's) next (character) life. All well and good, but it is a bit slow to take effect unless your games are very bloodthirsty. Both games have identified an area in which the player may choose to do things that the character ought not, but have chosen to deal with it by a reward and punishment system that has meaning only in Player Reality rather than work the effects of the misbehaviour back into Character Reality by making the characters suffer the consequences

of their actions.

Social interaction between characters is probably the most difficult part of the game to release from confusion with Player Reality. Two games which have to try to regulate this are *En Garde!* and *James Bond 007*. The former manages it quite well by reducing most social behaviour to fairly abstract actions that have a pre-set effect on the character's social status (and thereby his standing with other players and his ability to influence NPCs). However, in order to achieve this the game has had to reduce NPCs to such a level of abstraction that they have hardly any personality at all. What would happen if some of the mistresses were players and therefore thought for themselves could be quite chaotic. In the Bond game, of course, you can have female agents. This is probably why, despite having produced a fairly entertaining set of rules for attempts to seduce NPCs, the designers have clearly specified that such rules cover interactions between players and NPCs only. Where two

hand, only really makes any sense if it is played by people who can string a few pots together now and then rather than by incompetents like me who have never made a break in double figures. *Mastermind* would be pretty boring if the contestants could never answer the questions. In role-playing, therefore, we should look to design game systems which actually help people to role-play well rather than ones which expect them to do so.

So where does *Golden Heroes* come into all this? I'm certainly not going to claim that it solves all of these problems completely. However, I do feel that the game contains systems which deal with the sort of problems that I have outlined in a novel, concise and useful manner which, most importantly of all, can be cannibalised by others and put to use in RPG genres other than superheroing.

To start with, none of the Prime Requisites govern any aspect of a character that is likely to become confused with Player Reality. Ego comes closest, but this is strictly limited to use in men-

nant factors of each Rating and combining them to produce an overall figure. Second, they are based not on an independent die roll or arbitrary choice but on the GM's assessment of the character as a whole, that whole including the fairly complete character background (the Rationale) that each player is obliged to provide when he generates his character. Thirdly, all of the ratings are subject of change at the end of each scenario depending on what happens during play. Fourthly, at least one of the component factors of each Rating is directly dependent on how the player runs the character: a player's behaviour is fed directly back into the system so that if a character does something out of the ordinary it will affect his life in the game world in future scenarios. Fifthly, for each of the Ratings, guidelines are given as to how they affect the course of play. And finally, although *GH* only uses three Ratings, the system used is sufficiently simple, obvious and flexible as to allow it to be used in many different ways in many different games.

Let us look at one of the Ratings in action. Public Status is something very important to a Superhero. If you are a national celebrity and are cheered wherever you go it is far easier to fight crime than if the authorities are suspicious of you and try to arrest you every time you show your face. Each Campaign Rating has five component factors, four of them being rated on a scale of 1-5 and the other on a scale of 1-10, the final Rating being on a scale of 5-30 derived by simply summing the component factors and being simplified by being split into bands. So, for Public Status the character is rated on a 1-5 scale as to how he is accepted by the authorities, how heroically he behaves, how normal he looks (because the public will always be wary of green-skinned monsters from Uranus no matter how heroic they are) and how polite he is to the general public. He is also rated on a scale of 1-10 according to how successful his crime fighting has been of late. These are combined to give a figure from 5-30 and this scale is broken down into bands so that the character is categorised either as a nobody, disliked, tolerated, popular, famous or legendary. The Rating is used in play in all sorts of ways from deciding whether a policeman will shoot or salute the hero to seeing if petty crooks laugh at

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players are concerned, events in Player Reality are allowed to govern the outcome. In both games then, there is one rule for player characters and another for NPCs.

What, then, can be done about such problems? Well one response is to say that role-playing is a skill and being able to separate Player Reality and Character Reality is part of that skill. Good players, therefore, should be able to discipline themselves to play within the limits of their characters abilities. If you are stuck with a dwarf with an intelligence of 3 then you must behave like a blockhead during the game. This is a valid course to follow, but I can't help feeling that it is somewhat elitist, reserving real role-playing for the fortunate few who can act well. In my opinion a really great game can be played in an enjoyable and satisfying way by players of any ability. A Sunday afternoon football match may not exhibit quite the skill of a Cup Final, but for the people involved it can be just as much hard work and fun. Snooker, on the other

tal and magical conflict. Strength, Vigour and Dexterity are all things thoroughly unlikely to be tested except through the game systems. Some of the Superpowers and Advantageous Backgrounds can cause problems if you've got them but there is nothing that affects every character. However, the most interesting facet of the game does not appear in the character generation system at all but later in the section about running campaigns. When you come to think about it this is sensible because many of the sort of problems that we have been discussing are really only important over a long campaign, or at least series of scenarios, where the players have the time to develop personalities for their characters. What I'm talking about, of course, are the Campaign Ratings.

The *Golden Heroes* Campaign Ratings system has a number of very attractive features. Firstly the Ratings recognise that each of the areas covered is complex, and they provide a simple means of assessing the various compo-

him or surrender on sight. Everything the hero does in public is liable to affect his Rating.

The other two ratings are Personal Status, the one for which the GM is encouraged to have the baddies always shoot at the most paranoid character first, and Detective Points which is one of these application of knowledge areas governing how easy the character finds it to spot clues and gather a circle of underworld informants. In *Marvel Super Heroes* a character trying to solve a crime would simply be asked to make a FEAT roll against his Reason or Intuition. How much more satisfying it is to know that all that hard work you have put into examining the scene of every crime you uncover, scouring the backstreets for rumours and cultivating informers is going to count in your favour whereas your colleague who spends all his time posing for cameras over the unconscious bodies of villains and appearing on the platform at meetings of the Law and Order Society will never get a tip-off in his life.

So how do we use these systems in other games? Personal and Public Status can probably be fairly easily adapted to any sort of game (for government backing substitute patron noble, for disturbing appearance substitute half-orc). Detective Points too can be used elsewhere, particularly in gangster and espionage games. Slightly modified they could be used to control the researches of Cthulhu investigators. However, for my main example I'd like to use a particular hobby-horse of mine, the attitude of players towards religion in fantasy games. For the most part, players of FRPGs have a very blasé approach to their deities, calling on them only when they need a miracle from a cleric or they want a convenient excuse to attack someone. *AD&D* players armed with *Legends and Lore* even make a habit of touring the planes and slaughtering the gods. OK, so it is fun, but it is actually much more interesting to play if religion means something rather than just being another source of supernatural effects. The problem is that to get a cure all you need is a tame cleric, and to get miracles all he needs is to be the right level. So, following the *GH* model, let us try to construct a Campaign Rating for Religious Attitude so that those characters who are genuinely devout reap the benefits and those that are not

suffer suitably without the gods having to resort to dropping thunderbolts.

As with all the *GH* Ratings I'll use four factors on a 1-5 scale and one on a 1-10 scale. There is no particular reason for sticking to this model and you may choose to change the balance of it if, for example, you cannot think of five components or you feel that all components should have equal weighting. I found that the existing structure gave me a useful framework for my design and therefore stuck to it. The first component I have used is *Superstition*, which runs from 1 (thoroughly cynical) to 5 (seeing spirits behind every event). Next on the list is *Loyalty to the Gods*. Elric is a good example of a fantasy character who is very aware of the existence and power of the gods but doesn't always do what they want him to, and I remember well a priest in my own campaign who was almost atheistic but who was fiercely devoted to his order and thereby managed to do his god's will most of the time. As far as the more mundane aspects go, *Social Status* is important, although this may mean different things to different religions. A cult which places great emphasis on social class will require this to be interpreted fairly simply, but a religion dedicated to a war god might give greatest favour to young warriors and the least to the very young, very old and females. Finally in the 1-5 scales I have got *Susceptibility to Fate*. Some people, it seems, cannot avoid getting noticed by the gods whilst others manage to live out their lives in blissful ignorance of affairs of cosmic import. The more important component, the one on a 1-10 scale, I have reserved for *Public Piety*, ie the amount of effort the player puts into going along with the accepted forms of religious behaviour: going to church, politeness to the clergy, amount sacrificed and so on.

The GM should rate characters using *Table 1*, with the following guidelines for beginning characters:

Superstition should start at 3 for everyone and will fluctuate depending on the player character's attitude to supernatural events during play.

Loyalty to the Gods again starts at 3 and changes only when the character is put on the spot and given an opportunity to show his loyalty or lack of it - joining the clergy will raise it to 4.

Social Status, as I said

above, depends on what social position the cult ethos regards as important.

Susceptibility to Fate should start at 2 because ordinary mortals are fairly insignificant, though it could be higher if the character is of royal birth or important in some way. It changes when anything of a supernatural nature has an exceptionally great or surprisingly minor effect on the character, or when the character actually meets some divine entity - an important cleric will normally rate 4.

Public Piety, of course, depends on how piously the character is played.

These five components are then summed to get a figure in the range 5-30 with the effects as noted on *Table 2*.

The Rating can be used in play in a number of ways. The simple uses are things like assessing a character's chances of being accepted into the clergy or of being granted a miracle. It could also be used as the basis for a Detect Holiness miracle that would enable priests to recognise enemies of the gods. Holy relics might burn characters with a poor Rating, petty demons would be more in awe of you if your Rating was high. In a game with a number of competing religions you might even rate characters separately for each one, giving the agnostic character an advantage because a high Rating for one religion would make you an immediate target for attacks by the others. If the gods took a reasonable interest in worldly affairs an argument could even be produced for modifying luck rolls dependent on the Rating. All in all it should make religion an interesting facet of the game rather than a dull cliché.

Other ideas for using the system come to mind fairly easily. *Traveller* players might like to consider a rating for Mercantile Ability, based on Charisma, Scruples, Respectability, Quality of Goods and

Recent Profitability. Characters involved in serious warfare might usefully be rated for Generalship, in terms of Leadership, Tactical Sense, Quality of Troops, Military Training and Success in Battle. It doesn't matter if one of the components is assessed in terms of one of the character's prime requisites (the *GH* Detective Points have a component governed by how useful the character's powers are in detective work). In fact, the only limit is your own imagination. Now where have I heard that one before... □

TABLE 1:
RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE
Superstition

- 1 Complete cynic
- 2 Doubter
- 3 Average
- 4 Suggestible
- 5 Will believe anything

Loyalty to the Gods

- 1 Goes his own way
- 2 Wavering
- 3 Average
- 4 Loyal
- 5 Fiercely devout

Social Status

- 1 Barred from temples
- 2 Unimportant
- 3 Average
- 4 Important
- 5 Beloved of the gods

Susceptibility to Fate

- 1 Who?
- 2 Overlooked
- 3 Average
- 4 Noticed
- 5 Part of the Cosmic Design

Public Piety

- 1 Gods? What gods?
- 2 Knows the gods' names
- 3 Has been inside a temple
- 4 Visits temples when it is convenient
- 5 Observes all major festivals
- 6 Regular visitor to temples
- 7 Makes regular sacrifices
- 8 Makes lavish sacrifices
- 9 Has devoted his life to the gods
- 10 Has devoted his life and property to the gods

TABLE 2:
OVERALL RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE

Rating	Disposition	Notes
5-10	Atheist	Miracles only work on the character if the gods specifically desire it.
11-15	Backslider	Priests will be forever scolding and pestering the character to get him to mend his ways. They may refuse him miracles or require him to do penances.
16-20	Acceptably devout	The character is treated normally by priests and supernatural forces.
21-25	Well known at temples	Priests will treat the character well.
26-29	Pious	Miracles always work on the character. He is lucky when doing the god's work.
30	Saintly	The gods listen when the character speaks. Demons fear him.