Clerics, Magic Users, Fighters and Thieves: Theoretical Approaches to Rules Questions on the Role-Playing Games Stack Exchange

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ABSTRACT

Many different approaches to the understanding of RPG rules exist within the gaming community. The rules as written conflict with the player's urge to mimic reality. The freedom of a game master's imagination fights with the reassuring weight of authority of established sources. From these axes, a design space emerges. We label the quadrants of the design space with the classic archetypes of RPGs. Clerics (Jurists) find answers to rules questions within the rules as written. Magic Users (Innovators) invent new rules to complement the sourcebooks. Fighters (Realists) use external reality to inform the rules-as-intended. Thieves (Imaginatives) obey the rule-of-cool and consider that anything goes in the pursuit of entertainment. We apply this design space to a case study of interesting questions and answers found on the RPG.stackexchange.com site, and apply archetypes to the answers we found.

1. INTRODUCTION

This case study aims to identify common characteristics in answers found on the Role-playing Games Stack Exchange (RPG.SE). This Stack Exchange site is a community-based Web site dedicated to questions and answers about role-playing games:

> Role-playing Games Stack Exchange is for expert Q&A by and for players and gamemasters of tabletop role-playing games. If you play or run Dungeons & Dragons, Dogs in the Vineyard, Shadowrun, World of Darkness, or any of the thousands of other pen-and-paper RPGs, and need answers to your questions (or would like to answer questions about these games), this is the place for you. The best questions are those that have specific answers; RPG.SE is not a general discussion forum. (RPG.SE Community, 2011)

By describing a two axis design space and assigning archetypes to the four quadrants thus produced, we will demonstrate the different common philosophical approaches that many users on the site take when answering questions about the rules.

With our use of archetypes named for the original character classes in first edition Dungeons and Dragons, we hope to evoke some of the connotations of interaction-with-world that those classes possess. Clerics recite truth from their holy books, fighters are grounded in physical reality, magic users shape the forces of the universe to their whim, and thieves reject the law to do whatever they want. The more serious archetypal categorizations are meant to be evocative of Robin Laws' (2002) player motivation archetypes.

The positing of a design space is a tool for players, game masters, and game designers for understanding the theoretical approaches that game participants take when understanding and articulating their own views of the rules and the game experience that the rules are intended to help create. The design space explores an axis of form and an axis of source. The axis of form indicates the respondent's relative prioritization of formalized rules versus the mimesis of reality. The source axis determines whether a respondent is more willing to use external sources as his authorities or prefers to rely more on his own opinions and intuition.

2. LITERATURE

This section explores the nature of a stack exchange, a unique question and answer venue that, for our purposes, captures coherent individual answers in a far more effective manner than a forum. We also look at RPG literature that impacts our domain, articulating archetypes and the Rule of Cool. We also touch on the articulation of nomothetic and ideographic approaches to rules.

2.1 What is a Stack Exchange?

Stack Exchange is a network of question and answer (Q&A) websites, each dedicated to a specific topic. It is an open, voluntary knowledge exchange where the community assesses the merits of each question and answer by voting upon them:

> We are an expert knowledge exchange: a place where physics researchers can ask each other about quantum entanglement, computer programmers can ask about JavaScript date formats, and photographers can share knowledge about taking great pictures in the snow.

> After someone asks a question, members of the community propose answers. Others vote on those answers. Very quickly, the answers with the most votes rise to the top. You don't have to read through a lot of discussion to find the best answer. (Stack Exchange, 2011)

Role-playing Games Stack Exchange is a younger spin-off site dedicated to the specific domain of expert Q&A by and for players and GMs of tabletop role-playing games. This stack exchange was created in August 2010. It is slowly gaining acceptance and momentum as a source of knowledge about role-playing games.

The single question multi-answer format encourages multiple answers per question to address the different possible viewpoints in an answer. The site encourages objective answers, as well: "All questions on Stack Exchange are expected to be objective and have concrete answers; we're not a place for conversation, opinions, or socializing. We also expect questions to represent real problems, not just imponderables, hypotheticals, or requests for opinions." Despite this requirement of objectivity, the site admits that there is a degree of subjectivity in all answers,

especially on questions without provably correct answers, and there is a rubric for assessing the quality of a subjective answer. "Good subjective" responses are founded in personal experience and real-world precedent via the *Back it up!* principle articulated by Stack Exchange moderator Cartaino (2010):

> Stack Exchange is about questions with objective, factual answers. ... Insisting on objectivity is fine for computing and mathematics. But once you get past the hard(ish) sciences, you veer towards the much softer social sciences. There are experts in these fields, but they are by definition, not exact. In fact, most academic fields don't have objective answers. ... The folks at Moms4mom owned up to the subjective issue and came up with a set of principles to create useful subjective discussions on parenting: the Back It Up! Principle. Back It Up! means that your answers must be based on either: Something that happened to you personally, [or] Something you can back up with a reference

The need for the differentiation between good subjective and bad subjective is a common problem on RPG.SE, as many of the questions asked do not have firm, simple, and unambiguous answers within the rules of the role-playing game from which they stem.

2.2   The Rule of Cool

TVTropes (2011), a Web site providing an encyclopedic listing of tropes encountered throughout modern media, describes the Rule of Cool as the principle that "The limit of the willing suspension of disbelief for a given element is directly proportional to the element's awesomeness." From a theoretical perspective, the rule of cool privileges the imagination of the players over external sources required for realism or rules consistency.

Laws (2002) states a similar rule of: "Roleplaying games are entertainment; your goal as GM is to make your games as entertaining as possible for all participants." The nature of the rule of cool and Laws' linked statement emphasizes that role-playing games are indeed entertainment. However, while the rule of cool exists as a function of the player's entertainment, casually violating a player's relationship with the rules through either overly strict enforcement or overly casual improvisation can violate Laws' rule. The research presented in this document should enable gaming groups to more accurately understand their tables and to realize the best instantiation of the rule of cool for their particular situation.

2.3   Nomothetic versus Ideographic

Guba and Lincoln (1994) articulate the nomothetic debate in social sciences where they note that general theories may not fit specific cases well: "This problem is sometimes described as the nomothetic/idiographic disjunction. Generalizations, although perhaps statistically meaningful, have no applicability in the individual case." While their argumentation is in support of qualitative research, the theoretical basis of the nomothetic as "law-making" conflict with the ideographic study of the individual case maps quite strongly onto the axis of form and the ideas will be used throughout this document. Players seeking the support of rules are far more nomothetic than those seeking mimesis with specific, individual cases of reality or imagination.

2.4   A Hermeneutic Approach to Rules

This document is compatible with Harviainen's (2008) hermeneutic approach presented in IJRP volume 1. The proposed design space articulates a number of observed approaches to textual analysis of rules. These analyses, proposed by players operating outside of their home game, represent the internal philosophical approaches of the gamers to the rules, rather than the constructed and shared narrative of the game. Harviainen (2008) explains: "There is a strongly interpretative, semiotic and textual side to all role-playing games, yet to treat a role-playing situation solely as a singular text removes a part of the game experience from the equation." Our study explores different semiotic interpretations of the same questions from different player perspectives, exploring the philosophical frames of archetypal answers.

3.   RULES PHILOSOPHY DESIGN SPACE

Two major axes seem to govern the types of responses present in answers on RPG.SE. The philosophy of an answer is fundamentally a question of which authorities can be used by the respondent to justify the correctness of their response to a particular question. There are two major forms of authority: rules and mimesis. Similarly, there are two sources of authority: internal and external. The two axes of form and source make up the design space onto which we can then map these philosophical archetypes.

3.1   The Axis of Form

Questions in RPG.SE are commonly about edge cases of a given rule system. An edge case of a rules system is a use of a rule or a potential action taken by a player that the rules do not explicitly cover. The rules can fail to cover a given situation through their contradiction, obscurity, or absence, whether unintended or deliberate. While these questions are not the only questions on the site, they do represent the majority of questions and are the easiest basis of a design space.

Rules, in a role-playing game, represent an encoded mimetic reflection of the fictional reality of the game filtered through the author's understanding and stylistic habits. They are an encoded social contract that players agree to insure that bad or otherwise undesirable things happen to their characters in ways that appear realistic or fun. A game where there is no chance of conflict or failure has no need of rules.

While rules are mimetic themselves, the act of encoding them and describing the statistical operations upon attempts at agency changes them from a purely mimetic representation of a world into a framework for understanding their own reality. Players at a table then build their own understanding of a world from these rules, instead of purely trying to mimic reality. However, answers to rules questions that are not well situated within the rule system can choose to derive their answer from other rules present in the system: showing how the edge case is indeed covered by the rules as written, or may try to describe a mimicable aspect of reality.

The act of using the rules as a reference to uncertain situations within the rules represents accepting the form of the rules: they have a structure and a meta-statistical pattern that can be used to adjudicate the situation in question. The acceptance of the form of the rules requires that the answers be from or suggested by the rules and internally consistent with the rules.

On the other side of the axis is the understanding that because the rules are designed to mimic reality, answers to rules questions should be drawn from reality as the primary form of the source. While the rules are a useful mediator, there is no need to draw upon them to cover edge cases or even to respect their authority when they imperfectly mimic something from the "real world."

Most people on the site, however, do not have a pure adherence to either rules or mimesis but fall between the two extremes. The articulation of archetypes within this design space is not meant to indicate that all who belong to a certain archetype always have answers that are at the extremes of the archetype, but that they are privileges of mimesis or vice versa.

3.2 Axis of Source

The source of authority is orthogonal to the form that authority takes. The source of authority represents the direction or source from which respondents draw their answer. The axis spans from a purely internal expression to a purely external. The purely internal source of value articulates only the respondent as the source of possible answers[1]. The purely external source leaves no room for opinion, instead seeking established and published sources for all argumentation.

There are no fundamental differences in ontological value between these axes: external sources are not necessarily better than purely internal or vice versa. While querents may value a certain type of answer over another, all responses to answers have strong subjective components. At the same time, there is a bias within the site towards objectivity. Even subjective answers are directed towards more phenomenological responses through the use of the "Good subjective/Bad subjective" criterion as discussed above.

This "good subjective" requirement limits the scope of internally sourced answers and the prevalence of people on that side of the axis. However, the fact that the criterion exists is a powerful argument that the axis is important to the concept of answering questions about role-playing games.

3.3 Archetypes

This work aims to present a useful conceptualization of each quadrant of this fledgling design space. It may be useful to describe a respondent in terms of these archetypes either for purposes expressing value of a potential answer or in a game design sense for articulating the intended audience that a given set of rules is designed for. It may also be useful to explore these archetypes when forming a group to play a role-playing game as each archetype has different expectations of the rules and the game master's responses to conflicts within the rules.

These archetypes have been named to reflect the roots of the role-playing game genre, being labeled "Cleric, Magic-User, Fighter, and Thief" to represent the four traditional archetypes of the hobby. The authors have found the connotations associated with these character archetypes useful when describing respondents and their approach to discussing the rules of a role-playing game.

3.3.1 Cleric - The Jurist - Rules-centric / External Source

A cleric is someone who finds answers within their "holy book." The cleric qua Jurist acknowledges the primacy of the rules to the game system and feels that the rules should be able to cover most contingencies. Most clerics want to use the "rules as written" to answer questions with literal passages from the rules and other supporting texts of the game in question.

For an answer to be considered good by a cleric, the answer must be well cited and situated within the literature of the game. While there are situations that may have not been anticipated by the rules, those situations should either be coerced into an appropriately fitting aspect of the rules or ignored outright. While a cleric may despair over the rules as being poorly written, they believe that departing from the rules will only create more misunderstandings and arguments without improving the quality of the game.

Clerics view "thief" answers with a great deal of skepticism as the answers of a thief, to them, do not have statistical equivalence to the game and introduce actions that were not planned for, potentially leading to game-breaking exploits or ad hoc rulings on the part of a game master. While Jurists acknowledge the utility of imagination, completely breaking the system for the sake of imagination strikes them as something un-fun and unpredictable.

3.3.2 Magic User - The Innovator - Rules-centric / Internal Source

A magic user also acknowledges the primacy of the rules. Instead of viewing them as an authoritative document, the magic user qua Innovator considers the rules a "good start." Innovators provide answers that are extensions or manipulation of the rules. These answers present "house rules" or entirely new subsystems to handle the edge case or game mechanic in question.

For an answer to be acceptable to a magic user, it must not be a blind recapitulation of the rules. Instead, good answers are considered responses that present fundamentally good or effective rules. The effectiveness of the answer in question based on the rules presented is far more important than the rule being a fundamental component of the game in question. Magic users are perfectly happy to graft components of other systems into new systems to make up for real or perceived deficiencies of the system in question. If no component exists, they create one, imagining a framework of rules that corresponds to the activity in question.

While a magic user engages in mimesis when they create new rules, the emphasis is on a coherent rule structure that translates the activity to the game rather than on a high fidelity. A good house rule must be coherent within the system rather than coherent within the outside world.

The non-systemic common sense presented by a fighter can be quite disturbing to a magic user. Intuitive responses that try to articulate the real's expected consequences to actions without any concern that the rules support that expression is a rejection of the Innovator's norming behavior.

3.3.3 Fighter - The Realist - Mimetic / External Source

The fighter qua Realist, views the rules as useful suggestions. They certainly allow people to create a shared fiction, but they should be ignored in any specific case where they are contrary to

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[1] Internal axis priviligees like to cite "Rule 0" a tenet cited explicitly in many systems and applied implicitly to others, that a game master or gaming group is free to alter or disregard the rules as they see fit.

reality. To a Realist, imagining the consequences of an action in their own umwelt is far more authoritative than the consequences for the action suggested by the rules.

The fighter's umwelt is externally sourced, however. It draws from fiction and discussions of physics. Few actions are purely original in the fighter's weltanschauung. The must be precedent for an action in either the real or the literature of the genre of interest. Ad hoc decisions made during a game are completely acceptable so long as they are realistic within the bounds of the game's genre.

A fighter, when considering the rules, prefers to consider the "rules as intended," a term which represents looking not just at the rules but also at the "flavor text" that those rules are supposed to support and the game-world concept the rule is supposed to be illustrating. By considering the intent of the game designers as expressed through flavor text and their other literature, the Realist can understand what situation the rules were trying to represent and adjust the rules for a better representation.

Fighters can be uncomfortable with the *a priori* nature of magic users. Most Realists do not see the need for coherent and systematically applied house rules: the judge of accuracy is not house rules but verisimilitude to "the real." Rules should be discarded as soon as they are unrealistic, not enhanced by new and more complex rule subsystems. Fighters tend towards the "good subjective" category of answer, as they can cite circumstances and prior art from other media.

3.3.4   Thief - The Imaginative - Mimetic / Internal Source

To a thief, anything goes. A RPG is a free narrative space to explore and have fun within. Anything that hinders or constrains the Imaginative's fun is beyond consideration. Rules, as to the fighter, are useful guidelines to be set aside when circumstances warrant. A thief places the entertainment quotient of a game above the consistency supplied by a game's rules or the constraints of realism.

Thieves are the least interested in answering questions specifically about the rules. When they do answer, it is to present a case for a cool situation or other imagined possibility rather than a studious justification from within the rules or the world. While the rampant creativity of the Imaginative can be a useful basis for more articulate answers, the thief's overwhelming emphasis is on "fun." Thieves tend to quote TV Tropes' Rule of Cool - "The limit of the willing suspension of disbelief for a given element is directly proportional to the element's awesomeness." (2011)

Thieves categorically reject the cleric's emphatic embrace of the "rules as written." During play, an Imaginative uses whatever rules they remember at the time and see little use in arguing fine points of the rules. The rejection of the primacy of rules allows a thief to allow their imagination free reign and play the game without worrying about external constraints.

4.   Case Studies

In this section, we explore how the archetypes map to specific questions and answers found within RPG.SE. While future works may apply more nuanced archetypal descriptions[2], this first foray

into the archetypal profiling of gamers is restricted to the simplest archetypal identifications for ease of communication.

4.1   Case 1: How do you help players not focus on the rules?

This question[3] by mxyzplk is exploring the edge case of the different cultures of gaming. In many ways, the question is looking at a group of fighter/thief archetype players wanting to teach cleric/magic-user players their worldview. The question generated a significant amount of discussion and animosity, not least because it was asking respondents to step out of their gaming paradigms and to consider alternative means of playing. This paradigm shift is roughly analogous to asking a scientist to consider an antithetical paradigm as valid and to explain how to change one's thinking to fit. Despite that, the question attracted many different types of answer, some of which involved remarkably useful suggestions.

4.1.1   Question:

> When I GM, I run games loosely from a rules standpoint, and do not feel bound to adhere to what the rulebook says when it doesn't make sense in a given situation. I adapt things to fit the game-world reality over the written rule and use my judgment as the final authority for in-game events. ... We have an existing large gaming group playing a variety of existing game systems (we've run long campaigns in Pathfinder, Savage Worlds, Alternity, Mutants & Masterminds, GURPS, Silhouette, nWoD, and shorter games in Dresden Files, Feng Shui, Unknown Armies, Godlike, Adventure!, and many more). At the table, players own rulebooks and roll their own dice. I am not looking to retool the group or choose a new system or make major changes to our order of operations. Things are working well for us and we are having fulfilling gaming experiences. ... We get new players from time to time, and sometimes their previous experience is that they've been steeped in 3e/4e D&D to the point where they just instinctively go to the rules over rulings. They want to spend ten minutes looking something up rather than just running with it, or are surprised when I say something can't happen, or look at another player who tried something not defined in the rules and succeeded like they're cheating or something. They want to build whatever options they can buy into their character and are sad when I restrict them. I want to help these fragile new souls adapt to our gaming style. ... Assuming we don't think that they are just so incompatible with our playstyle that we wouldn't invite them in the first place, how do we help a willing new player become comfortable with our more freewheeling approach to the game? Naturally we inform new players of our approach, but group and individual approaches are poorly defined things, it's not as easy as matching our label to their label and voila, they slot in to our style perfectly. When anyone goes into any group, there is a

archetypes can be incredibly useful descriptive devices that resonate with gamers.

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[2] One may even start talking about "levels" of certain classes, alignments, and even races. Drawing on the history of gaming,

[3] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/q/6212/760

certain amount of adaptation that happens implicitly or explicitly. We want to facilitate the culture change process a new player may be going through.

4.1.2 Answers

This case will explore the archetypes seen in excerpts of some of the top answers, positioning them on the internal/external sourcing axis and the rules/mimesis axis. While the question itself is strongly biased towards mimesis, some respondents articulated a process or series of rules to help people to transition. The top five voted answers will be analyzed.

4.1.2.1 Magic User: Valadil

> Here's a technique I've used. When I invite people to a game I tell them that the game we're playing is a homebrew system called "Valadil's Game" which is loosely based on D&D.

> This does a couple things. Firstly, it scares off rules lawyers who want to play RAW. I figure those players aren't compatible with my games anyway and I'd rather just nip that in the bud. It also signals to the players that this isn't another kick down the door, slay the monster, loot the treasure D&D game. It removes that expectation and opens them up to something with more story.

> If you want to get technical about it, this is just a restatement of Rule 0. But it works.[4]

This answer is the answer of a magic user. An Innovator as game master demands complete control of the rule-space of the game, stating "my game, my way." There is a consistent rule applied from the beginning, the rules are acknowledged as important, and the source of the rules is the game master.

The comments following the answer also illustrate this case. ExTSR notes, "Since you're not using a published game, does that clearly say "DM is god & game designer both" (a possible turnoff)?" To which the respondent agrees, "@ExTSR, yes I clearly say exactly that. It's a turnoff for some players and I don't miss them. They probably wouldn't like my style of game anyway." The respondent indicates that his methodology is an explicit filtering mechanism to discourage players with conflicting rules ideologies.

4.1.2.2 Thief: Chaos

> The most important thing I do to achieve this, I think, is to communicate to my players that, while I am responsible for handling the actions of their enemies, I am not their enemy. In fact, I am on their side, because what we are all working to do is enjoy ourselves and put together some bits of story worth remembering.

> A lot of factors go into this, from body language and tone of voice to the overall structure of drama and consequences in the campaign. For somebody new and possibly traumatized like you're talking about, discussing it explicitly is probably a great idea. They may not quite believe you right away (cue testimonials from current players at this point), but my general experience is that once a player has some

evidence that you're not a sadist who feels like he's scored metaphysical points if he manages to kill their character, their need to hedge themselves about with a forest of rules starts to ease up. Creative interpretation on your part becomes something to look forward to rather than fear, and dice rolls can be allowed to be more of a source of possibly unanticipated flavor to the course of events than ironclad, micromanaged determiners of all outcomes.

> If someone is still clinging to the rules after a gentle introduction to non-adversarial gamemastering, the next tactic I would try is moving too fast for the rules; creating a situation where you're asking for responses and describing consequences at a speed that leaves no room for number-crunching, and (very importantly) doing so without inflicting terrible consequences on the new player, even if they freeze up or try to lawyer and you have to declare their character to be standing around looking confused while you move the action forward. It may be a bit rough on the player (and is as demanding on you as a GM as it is potentially exhilarating), but hopefully can establish that first bit of trust that playing without the safety net may be all right after all.[5]

This answer is that of a reasonable thief. They are firmly centered in their own experiences and mimicking the body language and behavior of other non-confrontational encounters. The line that is most evocative of the Imaginative's ideology is, "Creative interpretation on your part becomes something to look forward to rather than fear, and dice rolls can be allowed to be more of a source of possibly unanticipated flavor to the course of events than ironclad, micromanaged determiners of all outcomes."

4.1.2.3 Cleric: Allen Gould

> Speaking as a Rules Lawyer (I try to think of myself as a good guy, i.e. "how can the rules let you do what you want to do"?) and the occasional TD, I've found a couple simple rules work out.

> No checking the rules on your turn. Look it up while you're waiting.

> That includes the DM - if you ask the DM if you can do something, you get their best guess; we're not stopping the game to research.

> Whatever the DM decides that day goes. If we look it up after the game (or you look it up in the book while you wait for your next turn) and the book disagrees, the book is wrong today.

> (For the DM) - the usual caveats about permissibility [sic] - I tend to judge based on "are they doing it because it's cool, or because they're sneaking an extra attack in?". Cool gets a nod, power-gaming gets a "nice try".

> If you have a player who has trouble playing "fast and loose", I'd recommend Paranoia for a one-shot. Since it actively punishes the player for arguing with the Ref

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[4] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/6212/6215#6215

[5] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/6212/6296#6296

(or even admitting they know what the rules are!), it's a great way to make us lawyers relax for a day. :)[6]

It is difficult to justify a difference between cleric and magic user, and the respondent is on the border between them. Clearly, the respondent is rules-centric to the degree that he articulates a set of rules for having no rules. However, the element of the answer that demonstrates the Jurist nature of the respondent (besides the self-categorization as rules lawyer) is the recommendation of the game "Paranoia." The Jurist correctly realizes the best rule structure to answer the question at hand and advances it without changes.

4.1.3   Analysis

This question explores the reactions of players to having their rules paradigm, or position on the Form axis, challenged. It explores those assumptions by soliciting recommendations on how to change paradigm. Valadil's answer is of someone firmly in the magic-user camp and having no difficulty thinking as a magic user. This can be contrasted with Chaos' answer, which essentially communicates the same idea of "rules-light" but places an emphasis on the absence of rules and using the rules as a source of inspiration rather than the game master also acting as house-rule game designer. Allen Gould's answer is that of a cleric creating a structure around himself to protect himself from the rigors of the game. That structure includes noting a gaming system that has, for its rules, the very characteristics requested.

4.2   Case 2: How do I get my PCs to not be a bunch of murderous cretins?

Unlike the prior question, this question[7] by mxyzplk is not challenging the fundamental philosophies of the players' acts of gaming. Instead, it's asking how to manipulate the players' choices around a moral question.

4.2.1   Question

Heck, it's such a problem that there are entire satire RPGs like Greg Costikyan's Violence and John Tynes' Power Kill dedicated to the issue. In most RPGs, PCs become inured to murder and other antisocial activities very quickly and quickly enter depths of depravity that wouldn't be appropriate in the worst parts of Rwanda. Armed robbery, mass murder, and genocide become routine parts of an adventurer's day, something only the stick-in-the-mud characters with the most extremely stated ethics object to. Total war is both a modern concept and also one not applied to just any conflict.

The sophistication of the gamer mindset towards this can be demonstrated that the most meaningful question usually debated is "but should we kill the noncombatant children" or "can we just murder people out of hand as long as they're from a typically evil race?"

...How can I give my PCs a newfound respect for human life?

4.2.2   Answers

By asking for a theoretical solution to a problem of player morality, such as the player having characters that are comfortable just short of genocide, all paradigms are possible in these answers.

4.2.2.1 Fighter: RMorrisey

I disagree with the suggestions that game mechanics will solve the problem. Things like XP penalties, and increasingly tough authority crackdowns may help; but, the real thing that drives empathy from players is good roleplay from NPCs.

Think about the things that make you not want to go around killing people in real life:

Killing is wrong. If your PC is religious, it's almost certainly in conflict with their faith. In D&D, a paladin or cleric's deity may have a few choice words or omens to share with the PC, regarding their indiscretion. If your PC is a good, neutral, or lawful character, you can question their actions, and threaten them with alignment change.

Killing is taboo. Friendly NPCs, be they allies in battle or local villagers, should serve as role models for the players. A fellow warrior might stay the hand of a PC, and suggest taking them alive, even arguing with the PC about what's the right thing to do. A group of villagers might shun the PCs, or be terrified, even traumatized, by their actions. A priest might gently counsel the PCs to a higher, more humane course of action.

...When the players do something terrible, make them come face to face with the tragedy and horror of what they've done.[8]

This answer is externally focused and looks to the real world consequences and prohibitions against genocide and total war. While the statement: "Think about the things that make you not want to go around killing people in real life" could be construed as an internal authority because "things that make you" statement, the source of authority is the real, not the player's imagination.

4.2.2.2 Cleric: Jadasc

I think it's important not to "double-deal" at times like this; if you've established that some adversaries are there to be mown down like wheat before the scythe in pursuit of gold and XP, it's disingenuous to then put them forward as thinking, feeling beings worthy of respect and negotiation. If you want to have your PCs show a respect for human life, make sure they know which of their foes they are expected to treat as "human."

Even this, though, will fail before a certain percentage of your players, who will not concede that imaginary people have any qualities they need to consider real — neither their fear nor their respect will motivate them to consider them as anything other than tactical obstacles. Some folks just won't grieve for pawns.[9]

6 http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/6212/6334#6334

7 http://rpg.stackexchange.com/q/8002/760

8 http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/8002/8010#8010

9 http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/8002/8003#8003

Jadasc's answer illustrates the Jurist's approach to the problem: fairness, consistency, and reciprocity. He identifies the rules basis for the players' motivations and advices against the hypocrisy that would result from maintaining the rules but trying to layer guilt over them. There are elements of the Realist in the answer as well, indicating that "some players do not grieve for pawns" but even this is a reflection of the perception of the game world as a rules-constrained system rather than a reflection of real life.

4.2.2.3 Magic-User: Gomad

Don't Make Killing What the Game is About

D&D laid this trap for us ages ago when XP became about what you could kill, not what you could accomplish. RPGs in large part followed suit, and became The Great Big Game of What Can I Kill? Asking players in a game like that to not kill everything they can is folly. It's like asking Monopoly players to not buy stuff, charge rent, or pass Go. You're changing the game significantly.

Fortunately, RPGs aren't Monopoly, and you can change the rules to a certain extent without making it a totally different game.. Whether you're trying to change the timbre of a current game or trying to make the next one you run different, there are steps you can take.

...In the Middle of an Existing Game

As GM, you have some control over what a continuing game is about, even though System Does Matter. So if you're locked into a system that's about killing everything you see, there are still things you can do.

But you're going to have to let people know that the game is changing, one way or another. Do it out-of-game with a discussion as above. Or do it in-game by having the PCs transported out of their world to another place (or another plane!) and make it clear from the get-go that their baseline assumptions of reality are now wrong.

You're in charge of the economies in the game. Yes, economies. Plural. Everything that has an ebb and flow, everything that is gathered and used is an economy:

...But you can hammer clerics for killing by taking their spells / blessings from them to show the displeasure of their god - assuming the god isn't a god of death or chaos or something and then, wouldn't the rest of the party be hunting that cleric?

...If a wizard kills a sentient creature with a spell, give him the XP but then hit him with "feedback" from the death of that creature. Roll (or choose) another spell he has memorized and make him forget it due to strain. Or make lethal spells cost more magic points to cast, or whatever causes pain in the economy of magic.

...Not every character has powerful supernatural forces as the source of his power, though, and murder has been a tool of successful people in the real world forever. So what to do about the mundane killers in your party?

Treat them like murderers: Everyone who knows what they've done should recoil from them. Authorities, if they exist, should come after them. The families of their victims should declare vendetta or even war. Offer rewards for their capture and death.[10]

The excerpted elements of Gomad's answer are purely those of the Innovator. Gomad presents a framework for systemically changing the rules of the game. His first thought is, indeed, of: "Fortunately, RPGs aren't Monopoly, and you can change the rules to a certain extent without making it a totally different game.. " a very rules-centric answer focused on the changeable elements stemming from an internal authority.

4.2.2.4 Thief/Magic-User: Pulsehead

If players pick up on subtlety, give them a subplot quest from the town's sheriff to go find an adventuring group and bring them back to the town for trial. The charge? The fighter hadn't washed in a few weeks, the stableboy made a comment under his breath that the fighter smelled worse than the rest of the poop-filled stable, and the fighter killed him in cold blood. Further, the rest of his party either said nothing, or actively helped him escape.

Set the reward structure up so that if the party comes in and stands trial they get a very good payday, but if the players bring back corpses, they get just a token payment. Only to be forced to go through manslaughter (not murder!) charges for killing the suspects of the stableboy murder.[11]

Pulsehead's first paragraph is a perfect example of Imaginative thinking: the solution is presented from a personal context and personal inspiration. It does not try to alter the rules or perform any activity save for an Imaginative solution to the problem by manipulating the narrative elements within the game.

The second paragraph blends thief and magic user. The Innovator's use of custom rules is echoed in the comment about reward structure, but even this comment can be taken as an in-game reward rather than the rules-mandated structure of rewards that a cleric would espouse. Even with this blending, this answer is an excellent example of the internal source of ideas through calls to allow character mimesis through giving them anti-murdering plots rather than structuring the framework of the world to inform the choices and actions of the players.

4.2.3 Analysis

This answer illustrates all four archetypes extremely well. Gomad and Jadasc articulate solutions that are found in rules documents. Jadasc focuses on the extant social contract that exists between system and players, nothing that the system itself encourages this sociopathic behavior. Gomad instead focuses on a series of custom rules that can be applied to manipulate player behavior.

In contrast, RMorrisey and Pulsehead articulate character focused solutions. These solutions provide a basis for character and player mimesis. Instead of the nomothetic basis for behavior as indicated by reference to external or internally sourced rules the fighter and

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[10] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/8002/8040#8040

[11] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/8002/8789#8789

thief almost engage in a idiographic mimicry of specific cases, articulating their justification on a post hoc case by case basis.

It is clear that all of these answers are excellent answers to the question. Their difference is not in quality, but in philosophical approach to understanding player behavior and the interaction between chosen actions and the rules of the game and the group.

4.3 Case 3: How do I adjudicate the natural tendency for hikers to spread in D&D 4e?

This question[12] by Brian Ballsun-Stanton is exploring a slightly contradictory idea: introducing simulationist (Edwards 2001) aspects to the gamist mechanics of Dungeons and Dragons Fourth Edition (D&D 4e). D&D 4e presents a system which supports a more abstracted play style, encouraging the players as heroes to gloss over the tedious and ordinary details of adventuring.

As conflicts in D&D 4e are somewhat stylized set piece battles, the idea of having a "random encounter" in the wilderness is contrary to the systems designed into the game. By asking this question, the querent was deliberately trying to provoke a cognitive dissonance in the minds of the respondents.

4.3.1 Question

This question [was] inspired by [a] rather grognardian post over on the Tao of D&D.

Functionally, the post asserts:

But suggest to a party that they're too far apart to hear one another as they strike out in the wilderness, and they will soundly protest. I've had players protest that they're characters would go off to be alone behind a bush so they could pee.

Issues that this question should address:

Calculation of speed penalties

Starting positions as a function of speed penalty chosen

Ways to get player buy-in

Consequences of the same behaviour on monsters.

The question is: what is an interesting and fun way to handle the natural spread of adventurers while travelling from a 4th edition perspective?

4.3.2 Answers

These answers illustrate possible approaches to a strongly cleric question. The nomothetic paradigm appeals to clerics, and offers a source of cognitive dissonance to the other archetypes that should be relieved in their own distinct idiom.

4.3.2.1 Cleric: Adam Dray

From a 4th Edition perspective, none of this is interesting.

You're talking about stuff that happens between the encounters, where the rules are largely silent. Role-play, have fun, whatever -- but don't get stuck on how to handle it with rules.

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[12] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/q/5080/760

4th Edition PCs are heroes. They don't have to worry about where to pee. They don't have to worry about how far to space themselves while traveling overland.

If you're suggesting ways to separate the party so that some of its members don't get to participate in a combat encounter, this is particularly not interesting-- especially to the players who watch helplessly from the sidelines.

Let them travel how they like and get them to the next encounter quickly.

Wilderness Experience

My personal hiking experience suggests that you can be hundreds of feet from one another and still have line of sight, hear them, or at least have a good idea where they are. This depends on tree density, brush density, and terrain.

Old forest can be surprisingly sparse under the trees, where the upper leaves block light and kill ground cover. Dried leaves and twigs produce an unmistakable crunching sound that gives you away for surprising distances. Young forest has more small trees and bushes.

Some of the densest wilderness I've been in was wet scrub, with six-foot-high bushes and grasses. The ground is soft but not necessarily mucky and the grasses camouflage you well. You could easily lose your friends in that.

People who know far better than I

Take a look at some of these links, which deal with squad tactics for modern soldiers. Some of these formations separate groups of soldiers by 10-50 meters.

Squad Movement (U.S. Army ROTC)

Field Manual 3-21, Chapter 3, Tactical Movement (U.S. Army)

If PCs are traveling overland and not expecting constant contact with the enemy, then they will probably spread out to around 10 meters between PCs, as visibility permits. In jungle or other extremely difficult terrain, PCs might have to go single file, but you'd still put reasonable distance between them.

Make it a Skill Challenge

4E already has a way to handle the stuff between encounters: skill challenges. Don't create a new subsystem; use the one the game already has.

I assume there's a reason they want to stick together. Determine if they manage to get where they need to go and maintain group cohesion via the skill challenge rules. If they fail, they get separated. Anyone who fails a roll in the skill challenge can end up separated from the group by N squares during the vital encounter.

The skill challenge probably has Nature and Stealth as primary skills. A player might make a good case for using Perception, Athletics, and Endurance as secondary skills. Insight or Diplomacy might help draw players back to the group fold.

All this leads into a wilderness encounter of some sort. Success at the skill challenge means getting to place characters in a reasonable place on the map. Failure means one or more characters are separated from the group, possibly to their great disadvantage. Perhaps they get ambushed and overwhelmed. Perhaps it takes them one or more rounds to catch up to the rest of the group.[13]

Adam's answer is a Jurist's answer. The recommendations are focused around the rules and the intent of the rules. While his use of his own wilderness experience certainly imparts some aspects of the Realist to his answer, but does not impart his fundamental justification, only adds weight to his rules-based argumentation to use a skill challenge when it really matters. By harnessing reality to the rules of the game as written, Adam's answer is a perfect example of a cleric who is aware that the rules are based in reality.

4.3.2.2 Fighter: Aramis

The tendency of hikers to spread (or lack thereof) has a lot to do with WHY they are hiking.

Modern recreational hikers tend to spread because they can do so safely, and part of the enjoyment for many is being out of sight of other people; the earshot rule is a matter of safety, but very lax, and in most places people hike, large predators are long since past endangered, and most have been selected for fear of people for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

But modern recreational hikers are not a good representation of adventuring parties in hostile wilderness.

Most hunting parties, on the other hand, stick close together, at least until the prey is spotted. This is to reduce the risks from the prey, from one another's weapons, and from other predators. Generally, such a group stays within a couple yards of each other, staying clearly within one another's sight ranges. Many use hand signals once prey is spotted, reinforcing the need for short ranges.

A military unit moves much the same, maintaining similar paces by long hours together, and by having it drilled repeatedly into them. Patrols don't tend to bunch up, but also tend to stay between single and double interval (2.5-5 feet; roughly 0.75-1.5m) in a single file until encounter, and then bunch up for instructions if time, or spread to line abreast if no time, but again, tending to stay single to triple interval (2.5-7.5').

In 4E terms, this means, essentially, a patrol type formation is going to be about 1 square apart, in a column, maybe a double column.

One doesn't even normally break LOS to engage in bladder and bowel relief; one simply finds a spot where one can still be seen, but has lower body privacy.

Looking at 4E, the majority of characters look to be more hunter types than military, but one can't rule them out. What can be ruled out is the casual hiker. D&D wilderness is absolutely viciously infested with monsters. It's scary, dark, and dangerous, and people who go out alone often don't come back. Therefore, expect all but the most foolish characters to stay pretty close, not more than 10' between each, and either in a cluster or line.[14]

Aramis presents an answer firmly rooted in external mimesis. He is a Realist who maps measures of spacing and distance in the world to a militaristic and sport framework. From that framework, he adapts into measures of D&D 4e distance without constructing any nomothetic governing rules for those spacings.

4.3.2.3 Thief: SevenSidedDie

Ask for marching order, tell them how far apart they naturally end up marching in this terrain, and then let them accept that or make a special effort to march differently.

Then move on to more interesting things. (Such as having a jaguar drop on the head of the last one in line.)[15]

Seven's terse answer is an example of the thief invoking the "Rule of Cool." Seven correctly asserts that the topic is not interesting in the context of fourth edition, offers a suggestion that draws on the game master's internal expertise of the world to add verisimilitude, but dismisses additional detail as uninteresting.

4.3.2.4 Magic User: mxyzplk

...I handle this in a somewhat abstract way - I use Survival or Luck rolls or whatever the edition has to support such things to see who specifically triggers a random encounter or other hazard on a journey, and people are closer to or farther from the action depending on their checks.

For example, I had a party in 2e traveling through the Underdark for days on end. They each had an [U]nderdark survival NWP they had learned from some svirfneblin. Each day, everyone made a check, and bad failures were faced with hazards (saving throw to not fall down a crevice and break a leg, for example) or triggering wandering monster encounters (you went to take a dump behind a roper, it's angry). Basically, worst roll was the one who took the brunt of it, and I SWAGged that other characters were about 5' away from them per 1 point of difference on the checks (so if roper guy rolled a 5, and the closest party member rolled a 9, they were 20' away). I'd expand that to greater distances outdoors, 1 point would be 10 feet or even 10 yards.

Sometimes specific players would indicate that they were going to make it a habit to stick close to a more accident-prone member of the group, which was certainly fine, and that would trump the random roll - if you want a rigorous rule for such "buddies," make it

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[13] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/5080/5085#5085

[14] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/5080/5091#5091

[15] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/5080/5089#5089

1 increment away per 5 points of difference on the rolls. In specific caving or mountaineering situations, people might be roped together, in which case obviously it's less abstract.

I generally didn't consider anyone to be so totally far away from the action that they were insensible to it unless they specifically said they wanted to (scouting ahead so that the more tarded members of your party don't spike your Stealth check is a popular reason). Adventurers are more military in their outlook and though they may not all stick in formation, they certainly are reasonable to say "I don't let them all get out of sight..."[16]

Mxyzplk's answer illustrates the approach of a magic-user to the question. The Innovator looks for rules in associated systems, manipulates them to fit, and presents them as a coherent structure. The mechanics presented focus more on invented mechanics than external realism, but present a coherent and predictable mechanical structure to help players understand their own local reality with this house rule in place.

4.3.3   Analysis

This question was designed to elicit cognitive dissonance in the respondents. The variety of answers well represents the different archetypes of rules-thought. This answer is useful to show how even the most rules-focused answers had mimetic elements within them. None of the archetypes excludes borrowing from the others, and the idea of "multi-classing" or mixing archetypes is perfectly legitimate. The purpose of archetype classification is to articulate an understanding of the respondent's relative priorities when understanding and interpreting the rules. Restricting archetype mixing out of some desire for "purity" reduces available categorizations and removes the nuance possible from archetype interaction.

5.   Future Research

A future research direction is the combination of Robin Laws' archetypes with our design space. Menard (2008), in his analysis of Laws' archetypes notes that: "Player type could be defined as the preferences a player has for certain elements of a RPG. … I really like those definitions because you can usually pinpoint a player's style by grouping a few traits." This allusion to a theoretical design space of player traits suggests a strong link with our archetypal mappings.

We suspect that a player who exults at *brilliant planning*[17] will likely be a Jurist or Realist when it comes to their approach to the rules. Someone seeking "supercoolness" will almost certainly be drawn towards the "thief" role, as a pursuit of exceptionalism within the game will give rise to a need for the rules to support the player's coolness, promoting a player's imagination over the formal rules.

With more research, it may be possible to explore the relationships between the archetypes identified here and the theoretical basis of Laws' player traits. By finding signifiers of what everyone at the game table wants to explore, in terms of traits, and how they want to explore it, in terms of rules-archetypes, a game tailored to the players expectations and philosophical intuitions of the rules may be made possible.

6.   Conclusion

What is the use of a case study? This introductory work aimed to explore some of the archetypes of answers found on rpg.stackexchange.com. By creating a theoretical framework around these answers, this work can offer a new look into how people relate to and understand the rules and norms of a role playing game.

A Jurist, drawing their inspiration from external rules, likes to use the rules as written. To a pure cleric, the rules as written provide a stable framework for the understanding of the fictive world the players engage in. This framework allows for the prediction of risky actions and therefore a more enjoyable time as players can form reasonable expectations of the outcomes of future events. To them, it is better to use the right system for the job than to ignore rules that don't fit from the current system or to make new ones.

An Innovator, creating their own rules, views the game master as system designer. While the published rules are a useful basis, the magic user will tinker with them until they match the reality that he wants to play in. This customized framework allows for an accurate and internally consistent model of the exact thing that the magic user is interested in. While it is difficult for other groups to use those rules, the magic user correctly assumes that other groups will make their own modifications to what is, to him, a living document.

A Realist demands a realistic mimicry of reality (or faithful genre simulation) from a game. The presence of a human adjudicator indicates that edge cases the rules do not adequately simulate may be governed from the game master's prior experience instead of the rules if that results in a more accurate representation of the shared narrative world. While the rules are used so long as they produce accurate results, a fighter's framework draws from everyone's shared understanding of objective reality to determine what the correct response of the world is to an action. As every action will have different factors associated with it, creating a rules framework to abstract away the fundamental reality will just result in rules that are ignored for a better mimicry of said reality.

An Imaginative demands an enjoyable experience. As a follower of their own imagination, thieves demand satisfaction from a game. Consistency to the "real" or to "the rules" is far less important than being able to express the Rule of Cool. If a thief can ignore a rule or bend expectations of reality for a "crowning moment of awesome" there is no choice: awesome takes priority. The rules are used so long as they provide an interesting creative springboard for the thief, and any realism or rules are ignored when they get in the way of the thief's realization of action.

As a descriptive work, our intent was to present the four archetypes and the design space with sufficient rigor that it is possible to differentiate them and design games for these different approaches to the rules. We aim for it to be clearly possible to differentiate a thief's approach to the rules of a game from a cleric's. While our case study was necessarily brief due to the word limits imposed by this journal, the illustrations of different answers to the same question should demonstrate the different archetypes quite well. We hope that the design space we offer will be of use to game designers and groups seeking to understand the different approaches individuals have towards rules that they are presented with.

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[16] http://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/5080/5090#5090

[17] A "Brilliant planner" is one of the archetypal traits found in Laws' analysis of player behavior. While his archetypes are named for less iconic

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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