



"Please Sir, Can I Have Some More?"

Let's start with a quick story.

At the beginning of any game, I ask my players, "So, what are you guys focusing on?" After all, nobody can focus all their attention on everything they do all the time. So, I make them choose that One Thing they're practicing. All their XPs go toward that One Thing. All of them. They can't switch their focus until that One Thing goes up in Rank/Level/Ability. If they do, they lose all the XPs they invested. That's called "keeping your focus."

It's a little trick, but it's a good place to start for this month's column.

For those of you who don't keep score in the *Pyramid* Forum, someone suggested I write a column on how a Dirty GM rewards his players. Well, I started that column about seven times, but never got further than a few paragraphs. The problem? I couldn't keep focus. I couldn't keep on one subject without stumbling onto another one. Each was a big enough subject to deal with all on its own, and I've got a word count here (otherwise, I'd go on and on and on. . .), so this week is the beginning of a series.

In this series (I *think* it's going to be a three-parter), we'll take a look at a few assumptions that nearly everyone takes for granted in roleplaying games, and how a Dirty GM turn those assumptions to his own advantage. This month, we begin our series with one of the greatest assumptions in roleplaying, and when I say greatest, I mean Greatest.

I'm talking about Experience Points.

Nearly every game system uses them (including the three I designed), but that's not the point I'm trying to make here. The point is: *Nearly every game system uses them exactly the same way.* This is so prevalent that you don't wonder if a game system uses XPs, you just assume it does. So this month, let's take a look at a few ways to play dirty with rewards.

The First Great Assumption: American Heresy

The first one starts before anyone even rolls a single die or writes a single number

on the sheet. It's the thought that All Characters are Created Equal. The assumption that all characters are equal is ridiculous. Is Elric equal with Moonglum? Is Aragorn equal with Gandalf? Is Frodo equal with Aragorn? Now, granted, Fafhrd and the Mouser are pretty equal, but they're the exception rather than the rule.

The fact of the matter is that roleplaying games are supposed to simulate the literature that inspired them. In fantasy literature, wizards are more powerful than anybody else. Only in game fiction is there a sense of "equality" amongst the group, and that's because those groups were built from characters created within a game system that spouted game balance. The Fellowship of the Ring was *not* a group of balanced characters. Nor were the folks running around in Shannara or the characters in the Thomas Covenant sagas.

So, I suggest you try something new the next time people create characters. I suggest you make them do a write-up of their character before they even touch a character sheet. If the players ask you, "How long should it be?" fall back on the old English 101 answer: "Make it as long as it has to be."

Then, as you look through each description, give out character creation points based on those writings. And I don't mean "Just reward the long-winded guys." Here's an example from my very own head.

Like I said in a previous column, I got the chance to play in a *Vampire* game recently. The character concept I started with was the Toreador assassin (killing is his art) from my New Jerusalem stories. Unfortunately, Jack Flash (with the 5 Dexterity, 5 Firearms, 5 Melee and 5 Celerity) wasn't all that interesting to play. There was no *character* in that character.

On the other hand, the character I wound up playing was much more interesting. He was an Assamite who lived eight hundred years ago. Instead of sneaking into castles, he sent a very formal letter saying, "I'm coming to kill you. I'll be there on the 17th. Make whatever preparations you need to make. You'll be dead by dawn." Unfortunately for the Assamites, my little buddy found Buddha and ran away to the mountains to find spiritual peace - for eight hundred years. He's come back recently because he's had a vision: the peace he seeks is in Los Angeles. So he's back, the guy who used to send kind notes, and while he's still a killing machine (5 Dexterity, 5 Melee, 5 Brawling, 5 Celerity), he *chooses* not to use his skills because he's found inner peace (Humanity 9).

Now, let's pretend I'm two different players, each presenting you with the above characters. Both of these characters look identical on the page (although one speaks Old English and the other speaks French), but don't you think one of them deserves a little bonus? They're both killing machines, designed to abuse the combat system beyond comprehension, but there's some *character* in the Assamite. Besides, as a GM, I can screw around with the Assamite. He balances himself out right well. But that Toreador I have to watch out for. I have to come up with super-bad killer NPCs to keep his quick self in line. But the Assamite keeps *himself* in line. All of his conflict is *inside his own head*. In Electric Johnland, the Assamite gets whatever character points he needs to make up his character. The Toreador, on the other hand, gets exactly what the game system allows.

Too Many Hams, Not Enough Pineapple

The real problem with rewarding Experience Points is the uncomfortable feeling that you're rewarding the good roleplayers and punishing the average ones. Joe isn't a great roleplayer, but he's a good one. He shows up every week, plays out his character to the best of his ability, and always brings chips and sodas. Tim, on the other hand, is a natural wit. He always gets a great laugh, always knows exactly what to say, and is always on his toes. He figures out how to fast-talk the guards, knows how to sweet-talk the princess and figures out all your traps in half a heartbeat. Of course, that means Tim always gets that bonus XP at the end of the game and Joe gets left out in the cold.

See the problem here? Joe's not getting the bonus XPs because he's playing to his ability and Tim's getting those bonus points because. . . he's playing to his ability.

All too often, we game masters (and I did say "we") reward the hams while forgetting about everyone else. Old improv rule (that I learned from those Sea Dog folks): you can't have ham without a little pineapple. In other words, it's all fine and good to give rewards to the players who put themselves in the forefront of the party, but don't forget the guys in the back.

"But John," you say. "What kind of reward can we give Joe? After all, Tim's entertaining. He's making the four hour game session interesting. Aren't we supposed to reward players who get into character and make the game fun?"

Yes. Yes, you are. But there's more than one way to reward a player. Even the quiet ones.

For example, Joe's character is a wizard. He doesn't talk much. He spends most of his time in Tim's shadow. However, like we said above, he's always there for the rest of the party. He always shows up on time and always brings chips and soda. He doesn't do funny voices, or get into character like the rest of the party, but he's always there with the right spell, just when the party needs it.

So, reward Joe for what he *is* doing. And don't reward him at the end of the game, reward him *when* he acts. Immediately. (Especially when it's his spell that saves Tim's overconfident hide.) When Joe's choice of spells is innovative or clever, give Joe bonus XPs to his spellcasting *right then and there*. Show him that you're paying attention and you know that what he's doing isn't as flashy as Tim, but it's just as necessary. A little of this kind of help goes a long way.

Rewards by Proxy

Here's another little Experience Point trick. Tell each of your players they have one Bonus XP they get to award to someone else tonight. Only one. When someone else does something super duper fantastic, they can reward that player with their Bonus XP.

Rewards Without Experience Points

Even the term is misleading. "Experience Points." I've never liked the fact that XPs can increase your Contacts, Friends, Allies or other Social Bonuses your character has. Experience Points should improve what's inside you. Maybe Experience Points are more like Insight Points. Maybe there's another kind of XP that helps you develop your Contacts, Friends, Allies and other Social Bonuses, eh?

Or maybe we should think outside the box for a second and figure a way to reward players *without* using points.

We all know there are a lot of different breeds of gamers. Some like social characters, others like combat characters, still others like introspective loner characters. Each deserves his own unique brand of reward. In other words, drop the whole generic "XP" thing and figure out a way to reward each individual character with something that will *really* make his eyes shine.

Had me a player who loved his Duelist character back when I was running *AD&D*. Now this guy was the *luckiest* fella you could ever meet. Always rolled 20's on this little jewel red d20. Thing was beautiful. Had a bubble in it. The character he played was an elven swordswoman who was cocky to the extreme. We didn't have the Overconfident Disadvantage back then, or she would have had it. This little Duelist was his favorite character. "Lady Luck," he used to call her. And so, when the time came to reward Lady Luck, I reached into that GM back of tricks and pulled out two things.

The first was a beautiful red ruby - with a flaw in its heart. It was a Luckstone. Added one to every roll she ever made. The second was a sword - a Sword of Sharpness. I think you know the language I'm talkin' here.

Another fella in the game played a Dwarf Berserker. The problem with this little guy is that he was under a curse: he couldn't talk. If he muttered even a single word, he'd go nuts and kill everything in the place. Once again, I reached into that GM bag and pulled out. . . a Dwarven Hammer. You know, the kind that comes back to you when you throw it and kills giants with a single blow? The only problem was the hammer's magical properties would *only* work. . . when its name was spoken.

(Come to think of it, I can't remember if this was *my D&D* game or someone's that I played in. Memory can be a tricky thing sometimes, eh?)

Social players (the lovers, not the fighters) are even easier to reward. Every lovely lady they charm, every warlord they impress, every prince they poetically pontificate (sorry, got carried away) is a magic item onto themselves.

The lady can use her own beguiling beauty to win the character favor in court, thus getting him into the best parties, shaking hands with the *real* movers and shakers. You know the rule: "It's not what you know, it's who you know." But then again, making friends in high places isn't the only way to reward a player.

A bard in one of my *D&D* games stopped in the street to tell a group of children a story. He wanted the XPs (he needed ten to hit the next level), and I told him, "Tell a story and you've got it." It was a great story, and I gave him the XPs he needed.

A little later, that glib tongue of his got himself (and the rest of the party) into trouble with a band of nastiness in a local tavern. The party was outnumbered three to one, and the fellows had black poison dripping from their twisty blades. But then, a dark cadre of men stood up in the corner of the room and pummeled those ruffians into a bloody mess. When the fighting was done, one of the shadowy fellows walked up to the bard and said, "I heard that story you told the children this morning. Brought a tear t'me eye, it did." Then, the ruffians walked away.

That same band of ruffians turned out to be the best allies the party ever made.

They were the Thieves' Guild.

No Work, No Roll

Every GM rewards his players for good roleplaying in one way or another. Some GMs say, "If you roleplay it, I won't make you roll it." Others say, "If you roleplay it, I'll give you a bonus to your roll."

Check this one out. (By the way, a future game system may well include this trick. It was *my* trick, so I'm using it here, but if you recognize it, remember where you saw it first. Besides, the folks I gave it to are cool, so they'll give me proper credit for it. I hope.)

I recently had a discussion with a few friends about a religious RPG they're developing. They asked me for advice. I took a look at the system and was very impressed. But something was missing. I just couldn't figure it out. After a few hours of pizza and sodas and character creation, it came to me.

They were using Faith.

Now, in my book, Faith sums up to "Believing in something you can't prove." If you're gonna have Faith in an RPG (something I'm figuring out in *Orkworld* right now), you can't call it "faith." There's a mechanic for it. Players can see it. Players can *prove* it. That ain't Faith. That's Devotion.

And with that thought, another came to me. The game system should really use *two* sets of dice: d10s and d6s. If the characters were serving their god, they got to use d10s. If they were serving their own worldly interests, they only got to use d6s. Problem is, the Target Numbers don't change. Heh, heh, heh.

(Of course, now that I think of it, we could always throw in the "Sinful Rule": serve the Enemy, you use d4s.)

That's one for all you clerics out there. Hope you get to see it soon.

Last Trick

Back to the *Vampire* game. When my players got Blood Points, they got them in the form of Hershey's Kisses. You know, the kind wrapped up in red?

When Viscicitude came to town (a nasty vamp disease for those who don't know), I started giving out the ones with the crunchy middle. By the time they bit down, it was already too late.

End of Part One

Experience Points are all well and good, but they aren't the only way to reward your players. The *best* way is to look at the character sheet and find a reward that fits. A reward that *complements* the character in some way.

Don't let the assumptions get you in a rut. Find new ways of handling everything. See you next month when we tackle another Great Assumption. Maybe something

small next time; something like Wounds. Or maybe Game Balance. Yeah. Game Balance. That should shake a few nests. . .

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