

WHISPERS FROM THE PIT

Hit-No Damage and Can I Help?

Greetings from the pit once more, dear readers.

This *Whispers from the Pit* is actually two different rambles. It gets lonely in the Pit, so when the trolls stuff mail through my food hatch I'm always willing to discuss what the fans want. This issue it's "Cinematic Combat" and "Noncombatant Characters." I did receive an e-mail about variant Mass Combat ideas, but we're handling that in a Toolkit as it involves new "rules."

Cinematic Combat

The e-mail that spawned this topic read as follows, "*I'd like to read something geared towards helping players and GMs make combat more cinematic and heroic. It's hard to embrace Savage Worlds' versatility when you are so used to the ground and pound mentality of other games.*"

First, let's just remind you all about the Combat Survival Guide. This excellent piece of fan work covers a variety of combat situations and provides players with useful information on which maneuvers they should use in the various circumstances. The GM should stick one copy (it's free) under every player's nose and make sure they understand it. Take a few minutes to answer questions, pause the game very briefly to make reference to it, print it on a huge sheet and stick it over their heads if you have to.

Perhaps the best way to teach players how to use these tricks and maneuvers is to use them against their characters. If the GM follows the ground and pound mentality, so will his players. Have an orc use a Wild Attack, a Called Shot, or a Disarm maneuver.

The maneuvers aren't there just for players!

Hit, No Damage

Right, let's take a look at what may be causing this "problem" for our reader. Many of us have played certain popular games where hit points are used. Players are used to rolling damage and see it doing something with every successful hit. Aside from a few special abilities, combat is basically a hit and hurt affair where tactics and maneuvers don't really play a huge part.

One key difference between *Savage Worlds* and games of this type is that in *Savage Worlds* armor doesn't make you harder to hit, only harder to hurt. That's a key difference. Let's take a dragon as an example.

It has a Parry of 6, but attackers get a massive +4 to attack rolls. Hitting the dragon shouldn't be a problem, and even a totally unskilled character gets a d4+2 after basic modifiers. However, said dragon has a Toughness of 20. That's high by *Savage Worlds* standards. So, unlike in the other game, while

you may hit easily, you probably aren't going to cause any wounds. This is where the GM comes in. The "I hit, I don't do any damage" mentality might confuse a player who has only played hit point style RPGs. Use a few descriptive terms instead of game terms though and you'll quickly see a difference.

A hit that doesn't damage a foe still has an effect, just not in terms of game mechanics. The dragon may not be pumping blood, but look at it in comparison to hit point type games. A few points of damage to a beast with 150+ hit points doesn't actually cause it any harm either, it just *seems* that way because hit points can be seen to be dropping. The player feels like he has achieved something. *Savage Worlds* is different because the GM here should take a few seconds to say something like, "Your blow chips off a piece of scale," or "The dragon rears up, stung by your sword blow," or "The dragon hisses at you for daring to attack it." No game effect, but it might help the player visualize combat better than "hit—no damage."

When a wound is scored, make sure the players realize it. Don't just tally it off on a piece of paper or make passing reference to it. Describe the roar of pain, the spurt of hot blood, the stagger from the blow. If you can't describe it, you can't expect all your players to see it through their characters' eyes.

Going back to the Combat Survival Guide, *Savage Worlds* gives characters both maneuvers and Edges. The maneuvers aren't there because they fill space, they're there because *Savage Worlds* is about using tactics against your foes more than it is mindlessly bashing it to death. Sure, you can just smack the orc once and watch it fall, but against a dragon you really have to pull out all the stops—as it should be. Wild Attacks give you a better chance to hit (and a damage bonus), and that means you might get a raise and +d6 damage. Called Shots specifically mention being able to negate a dragon's Armor.

Our reader also mentions cinematic combat. Again, it is up to the GM to describe the attacks of his monsters and encourage the players to do the same. Maybe instead of saying "I attack," try livening it up with something like "I thrust at its belly." I'd recommend this for any game you play. It's only a few extra words, but it makes the action much more visible.

Tricks are Cinematic

Tricks, for me, are one of the coolest mechanics in *Savage Worlds*. With one simple mechanic I can do everything from pull rugs under feet to throw sand in eyes to flash some cleavage as a distraction (naturally we're talking about characters here—not me!). Tricks scream out to be used in cinematic

combat. GMs should also feel free to alter the outcome of a trick to suit the description. If a rug is yanked from under an orc's feet, for instance, it should probably fall over—even though that isn't specifically stated in the rules anywhere. It just makes good sense.

Here's another. A character is being pinned into a corner by an orc. The player declares that his character is going to turn, run up the wall, leap over the orc, and stab it in the back. A nice little maneuver, but what penalty should the GM apply to such a complex feat? The answer is NONE (other than the standard multi action penalty). All the player has done is describe an Agility Trick followed by an attack. Sure, it sounds difficult to pull off, but at the end of the day it's still just an Agility Trick. Start applying unnecessary modifiers and players will stop trying cool stunts.

What about if the same player wanted to slash the orc's forehead so blood drips in his eyes and blinds him? One GM might declare this to be a Called Shot to the Head. Another GM might see it as I do. The player never said he wanted to damage the orc. All he wants to do is a maneuver to gain an advantage. To me, that's an Agility or maybe a Fighting Trick, not an attack. Yes, it uses a sword, but only as part of the Trick.

Speaking of descriptions, when our hero slashes the orc's forehead, don't tell him he has +2 to his next action. Tell him, "The orc curses, frantically trying to wipe the blood from its eyes. You see an opening in its defense." I'd rather hear that than, "Okay, that works. You get +2 to your next action against the orc." Cinema is about showing people what happens, and if you want cinematic combat you have to describe the action, not the game effect.

Of course, don't let the players get one over on you. If the hero was being pinned into a corner by three orcs and said he wanted to run along the wall and use his momentum to attack all three with his feet, that's a description of a very specific Edge (Sweep) and he'll need the Edge to pull it off: which leads us neatly to Edges and descriptions.

A hero can Sweep by saying "I use Sweep." Great and functional, but kinda dull. Why not say, "I'll drop to one knee, swinging my sword at their knees"? (In this case, I'd ask the player if he's making a Called Shot or being descriptive!) Frenzy isn't just "I'll attack twice," it should be "I'll rain blows on him" or "I'll slash at his belly and then stab him."

So, cinematic combat is all about using Tricks, maneuvers, and descriptions, and getting the players to use them too.

Heroic Combat

Heroic combat is slightly trickier, as it involves the rules more. If you want your heroes to slay dragons for breakfast and then move onto something tougher for lunch, you should really be looking at either upping their power level or adding setting rules.

Noncombatant Characters

The e-mail which spawned this topic read, "..., my idea for a *Whispers* article is to cover the various way a player can use the rules to build a non-combatant (in various genres) and still feel useful and able to survive. To me there is always a focus in RPGs on combat, even the ones that profess to be Horror or Political games. Combat shows up somewhere. Many players want to play a scientist, or a politician, or a merchant, but as soon as they get in that sticky combat situation they start to feel useless."

A fair request, I feel. Not everyone wants to be a combat thug. One of my own favorite characters was a medic. All I'd do is run around healing people and avoiding trouble like the plague, yet I had great fun playing the character.

What I'd say here is simply to use Tests of Will and Tricks with a tweak to the rules. Why a tweak? Well, if you read the rules, only the character making the Test of Will or Trick gains any bonuses, and it's unlikely our noncombatant is going to make an attack. After all, that's why he's a noncombatant. Instead, let the benefits of these maneuvers be gained by the next character to attack the victim.

If a hero throws sand in a foe's eyes, he might want to scurry away and hide while he has the chance. The creature is still blinded, so it isn't unreasonable for the hero's buddy to get the bonus. If a colleague is being cornered by a space orc and I shout out "Hey! Ugly!" (a Smarts Trick or Taunt, depending on your view), why shouldn't the other hero get in a blow why the space orc is momentarily distracted by looking at me?

Tactics

Even if your hero only has a d4 in Shooting and no Fighting, he can prolong his life through common sense and use of the rules. In a gun battle, the key thing to do is find cover! Because a hero can make an attack at any point during his movement, a hero can jump out from total cover, fire, and then leap back into cover. If a villain wants to cap his ass, he has to go on Hold, which means he's fair game for the more combat oriented heroes.

Surrender

Time for a quick detour down a very distantly-linked trail. There is a general feeling, at least among gamers I know, that surrendering is like walking up to your mother and swearing repeatedly while simultaneously slapping her—something you just don't do... ever.

Maybe this stems from the way we used to play, or perhaps it's a "them and us" thing, or maybe even players seeing surrendering as losing. If you're outgunned, and assuming your foe isn't some outer god or slaving beast with an empty stomach, why not surrender? No GM worth his salt is going

to just mow down the characters (not if he wants you to play next week), and you can always hatch an escape plan, which might rely on stealth and cunning and not require the services of a combat thug.

From a GM's point of view, don't punish players for acting sensibly. It's their game as much as yours, and if they feel the odds are against them then they have every right to surrender. Imagine the state our own world would be in if nobody ever backed down.

Non-Violent Combat

Combat, in any form, is exciting. It's full of unknown factors and chance. Die rolls can turn out for good or bad. That's one reason every RPG has combat—the risk. Of course, not every combat has to involve bloodshed. Why should a bitter political negotiation be solved with a single simple die roll? Why not have opposed arguments and require the party to get a certain number of successes? It's also an excuse to exercise your players' roleplaying muscles, and you can award bonuses or penalties for good or poor roleplaying.

Let's look at a very quick example. The heroes are trying to negotiate a treaty with some elves (or alien race or whatever). The GM wants to extend the scene and declares each side gets to make a short argument and then make a die roll. To win, a side needs to reach 6 successes.

The players start with "By giving us aid now, you can help secure your borders for future generations." Whether or not the GM awards any bonuses for this depends on the nuances of the adventure (you don't expect me to do all the work for you, do you?). Either way, the heroes roll their dice and get a raise. That counts as 2 successes (one for the success, one for the raise). The elves counter with, "By helping you, we weaken our own forces, making it easier for our enemies to attack us." Good point, well thought out, and it deserves a bonus to the roll. The result is two raises, so the elves are ahead with 3 successes and the heroes need to start getting in some good arguments.

Not a sword in sight, nothing for a combat thug to do, and yet the outcome still affects the scenario (maybe even more than a fight would).

Character Generation

So, to answer the reader's mail, stock up on Smarts and Taunt (maybe Intimidation as well) and you can turn a noncombatant into a useful "combatant" without going down the Agility route (which often leads to buying combat skills because they're linked). Smarts should be a high trait for the archetypes he mentions, so it's not as if he's going down some bizarre road leading to, "Why does your character need this trait so high?"

Leadership Edges don't have to belong to generals either. A politician is supposed to be a leader, so why not give him Command? Okay, the other heroes don't benefit, but Extras do.

Block and Dodge don't have to be seen as Combat Edges either, despite falling under that category. They're simply Edges to help in avoiding getting hit, and Dodge is especially useful because:

- i) it isn't linked to Parry in any way, and
- ii) most sci-fi and modern settings are likely to have more guns than swords.

Any character wanting to save his own skin should seriously look at these, as well as Level Headed and Quick (if you go first, you can find cover first), and maybe even Fleet Footed if he's the "run and hide" type.

Of course, the fact that your character chooses not to fight doesn't have to mean he is incapable of fighting. The heroes may also be a group of ninja. Despite what the movies portray, ninjas weren't killing machines. Yes, they assassinated people, but they didn't wade into squads of enemy soldiers. Stealth and guile were their watchwords, and getting in and out quietly more important than a high body count. You could very easily run an entire campaign where the heroes try to *avoid* combat to achieve their goals. Gear like smoke bombs or bird whistles can be used to confuse would-be attackers or lure guards from their posts, without having to kill them, and skills like Climbing, Lockpicking, Notice, and Stealth should be more highly prized than combat skills. Naturally, this style of game may eventually involve combat (as we already established, the vast majority of RPGs will always involve combat because it is exciting and unpredictable), but the combat in such a campaign would not be the routine violence of a typical fantasy game.

So there you have it. Hopefully, this should help guide your players into descriptive action, and vary the style, nature, and frequency of combat in your Savage Worlds games. As always, of course, it's your game and these are suggestions, nothing more. If it suits your style of play, there's nothing wrong with a good ol' fashioned clobberin'!

Wiggy

GOT AN IDEA FOR ANOTHER WHISPERS FROM THE PIT? SOME ASPECT OF THE GAME YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT? LET US KNOW BY DROPPING US AN EMAIL TO:

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