

Much Ado About Nothing

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It had finally come to a climax. The Investigators in my *Call of Cthulhu* campaign had travelled across half the world. Unbeknownst to them, they were being guided by an agent of evil. In mid-adventure they were met by somebody who claimed to be an agent of good who tried to convince them that Things Were Not As They Seemed. When the Investigators tried to learn the truth, not all went well: out of anger — stupidity — frustration — or sheer chaos — they knifed the agent of good.

What could I do? The now-dead NPC was an important — nay, vital — part of the adventure. I did the best I could; brought in a *deus ex machina*, finished the adventure with a minimum of bloodletting on my part, and concluded the campaign. What next?

We sat down and analyzed the problem. People were getting too complacent. It was partially my fault — I had been too generous with spells and books; I depended too much on pre-written adventures (a problem growing out of a lack of time). This led to the sameness mentioned above and led to a laziness on my part. I could have been more flexible, made more changes, or, most importantly — followed up on “loose threads” as they appeared in each adventure. These could have been expanded into full-scale adventures in their own right.

The players also were to blame. They had grown too used to the game, it no longer surprised them, held their attention or — most importantly — created an atmosphere of fear and terror. Once that had left the game, we were left with a weekly session of “Kill the monsters and grab the spells and ancient books”; a variation on a more familiar theme in many FRPG’s. The group was beginning to fragment, the party was no longer a unified whole. That was not the way to go, not with such Awful Things lurking in each corner.

So. We had reached a juncture. What to do?

Part of the conversation during that day and over the next several days dealt with what to play next. We agreed that we all needed a break from *Call of Cthulhu*, not a permanent break, just one long enough to get us “fresh” again. Luckily, in our group of players (ten or so), we have several referees or people who are experienced enough to be referees. It was decided to split the referee duties between several people: one was going to run *Champions*; one was going to run *Paranoia*; one was writing up a multi-part *James Bond* game. I proposed several games to the players: *Stormbringer*, *Ringworld*, *RuneQuest*, *Twilight: 2000*, and *Star Trek: The Role-Playing Game*. The vote went for *ST:TRPG*. We also discussed other game-related things to do: assemble and paint miniatures; run some short RPGs, such as some “short subjects” from Steve Jackson Games’ *Toon*; have an “open game” day — invite everyone over and play various “micro-

games” such as *Illuminati*, *Dark Cults*, *Shogun*, *Struggle for the Throne*, *Undead*; play some “regular” games such as *Pente*, *Trivial Pursuit*, *Backgammon*; spend time on smaller portions of large games, such as the *Starship Combat Simulator* for *ST:TRPG*, *Snapshot* or *Mayday (Traveller)*, *Elric (Stormbringer)*, etc.

The conversation turned to refereeing. One thing that was agreed on was that playing groups were too large. The group generally ran from eight-to-ten players, leaving an over-worked referee. Players would have to wait while others went off on a tangent. Everyone would vie for the ref’s attention, and those that didn’t get it would feel slighted. We decided the ref’s ability to split his/her mind into multiple parts is limited to about four players. A discussion on the use of computers in role-playing was far-ranging: uses from rolling characters to resolving combat to helping to depict locales were all discussed. One problem was the cost of computers and programs. While computers such as the Macintosh and art programs such as MacPaint have great potential for referees and players, such items were out of range for our group.

We also discussed “distractions” or “props” for the game — slides, diagrams, miniatures, using music or sounds, odd lighting, documents, etc. Some of these had been put to great use in games that I had run or participated in. Most of us have used miniatures; either representing our characters or NPCs or larger items such as starships. However, there are many other props that can help to create and sustain an atmosphere. A document soaked in lemon juice and heated (carefully) can be turned into an ancient map or spellbound scroll. A toy gun can be used as a murder weapon. During one game, I used a piece of micro-fiche to represent listings of ship movements at the dawn of the Fifth Frontier War. I’m sure that many of you have heard about the “live” role-playing games being run in many major cities; games where a group of dozen or so people are assigned roles, where the setting is a castle or estate, and a good — if somewhat expensive — time is had by all. It was generally felt that these things were all useful and added to the game — if they were subtle. If they were overblown, if the music was too loud, for example, then the atmosphere would be destroyed because instead of being subtle, the prop would demand too much attention.

We also discussed alternate ways of refereeing. Since we have several people who can referee, much of the discussion centered on how duties could be shared. A senior-junior pair was suggested. The pair would work off of each other in planning the game, deciding on an overall structure to their game universe and adventures. In running the game, one of two approaches would be employed. In the first, both referees would work. If the referees are a real team, this could be a very enjoyable combination as one works off another, developing interesting storylines as they interact.

A potential problem would be if the pair were not a smooth-running team; friction might develop and the game bog down in internal squabbling. In the second, one person would do much of the work with the second person standing by. When the party wanted to split up, then they could do so without taxing a single referee too much. Some of us felt that this was a very workable idea; others felt that the junior partner could easily become dissatisfied with his/her role if he/she was not employed enough. One pair is going to give this idea a try, when they start up a game of West End's *Paranoia*.

A "parallel" games idea generated a lot of excitement in the group, and we undoubtedly will try out at least one of these ideas in the near future. There were three systems brought up. In the first, a large section of "adventuring area" (say, the Spinward Marches of GDW's *Traveller*, or the Ringworld of Chaosium's *Ringworld*) would be split up between multiple referees. They would meet and decide on overall goals, "pushes" and "pulls", geography, sociology, etc. Then they would separate, design individual adventures taking place in their individual areas, and start running campaigns. Referees could switch off playing groups, and even participate as a player under the other referees (assuming they don't know everything about the area). In order to avoid conflicts in the separate games, the playing area should be very large to lessen conflicts and "traffic" between the different playing groups. Of course, the playing area shouldn't be so large that even multiple referees are overwhelmed by the sheer bulk of the design job they are involved in.

The second idea was termed the "Mission Impossible" system. The referees get together and design a inter-locking, multi-group adventure. They then separate and run their individual parts, keeping in close contact with the other referees. An example of this might be a campaign for any one of the modern-day spy games on the market. Playing Group One must get the secret documents. Playing Group Two must penetrate the Navy base to steal a fast boat for the final assault. Playing Group Three must set up a diversion. If any one of these fails — all will suffer the consequences. The consequences could be as interesting as a successful attempt! Players could share information between groups as they adventured. Unlike games in which two groups are running the same adventure and shared information would give one group an unfair advantage, it might help another group and it might not matter to the other group. Referees would be running relatively small groups and would have the help from other referees in overcoming problems. This kind of interactive support system could keep problems from growing and overwhelming adventures and campaigns.

The third idea is the "parallel group" system. It closely resembles the first two in many respects. In this one or more referees works on a campaign. For example, they design a few sectors for ST:TRPG, in an interesting portion of space (the "Triangle", the juncture between the Federation, the Klingons and the Romulans comes to mind). The players take on different roles and split into various sub-groups according to their pleasure; the berserkers go play Romulans or Klingons, the peaceful good folk play the Federation, the bloodthirsty but trade-minded play merchants. The action between the three groups revolves around this area. Instead of having four separate adventures in a wide area (as in the first system), or an inter-locking adventure (as in the second), you have a compromise between the two. The groups

may interact directly (spaceship combat between the Federation group and the Klingon group), or the interactions can be more indirect. For example, the Merchants may visit a planet in the Organian Neutral Zone. While there they brawl with some Klingons. When the Federation ship calls on that planet the next game week, feelings of the Klingons stationed there may be altered. Or, the Merchants may get in trouble, steal some products from a backwater planet, say. The Federation (or the Klingons) then will be tracking them down in order to correct the situation. This system could be run with multiple referees running multiple groups or with one (highly energetic!) referee running the different groups at different times. Sources of adventures could come from playing one group off of another. The problems of a referee purchasing a pre-written adventure and finding that it doesn't "fit" his group is solved as well: Run your Klingon adventures for your Klingon group and the Federation adventures for your Federation group! Remember the Vulcan concept of IDIC and apply it to your different groups.

Finally, remember the basics. Many RPG's have advice on how to run a good game or on how to design a campaign: Go back and re-read those articles periodically. Don't be afraid to be spontaneous; following pre-written adventures too rigidly can stifle a campaign. Try to write an adventure on your own every now and then. Even if it doesn't measure up to the quality of published adventures it will give you a chance to exercise your mind and you will get more enjoyment out of your game. Try to go back to source materials for adventure ideas or to flesh out the background of your campaign: Science books, history texts, science fiction or fantasy novels, adventure novels, even bad romance can provide inspiration. Television shows or movies can also provide you with inspiration — provided that you don't follow the plots *too* closely! Don't be afraid to experiment either with your style of running a game or with where you get your ideas; the new thing that you try may lead to the most exciting game that you run.

Players can also help. They should be encouraged to participate. They should be encouraged to criticize as well. The notion of democracy is an odd one to apply to a role-playing game, but feedback in the form of player criticism can help a referee fine-tune his gaming. Of course — players should be encouraged to *role-play*! The fun is in being some one you are not; try not to slip into reality.

In many ways it's good that the *Call of Cthulu* game concluded so badly. I was able to analyze what I was doing wrong with my refereeing. The group was able to sit down and discuss what they would like to do next, how they felt could keep their interest up, and come up with some ideas on how to run games. Our experiences in different gaming systems will increase. We will be able to expand our group as we split duties. Ideas will flow freely on adventures as we share the work. Finally, instead of dying with the conclusion of *Call of Cthulu*, our games will go on. Someday we will return to the haunts of H.P. Lovecraft, a much more mature and unified group than when we left.

I'd like to hear from other players and referees. How do you overcome complacency? Do you use props and other atmosphere-creating devices in your game? Have you ever tried multiple referees? Please write to me care of STARDATE magazine: 44825 Cass Ave., Utica, MI 48087. Mark the envelope "Complacency Round Table."

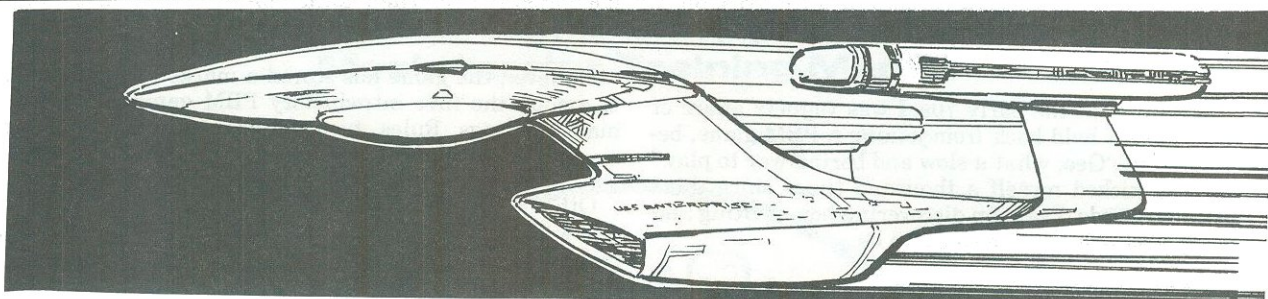
Schubel & Son, Inc., has just released *Alien Invasion*, a battalion level of, yup you guessed it, aliens invading U.S. terra firma. This appears to be an adaptation of other battalion-level games which George Schubel is offering.

George has released so many new games with the same basic game system that one pundit wondered aloud if Schubel & Son was starting a game of the month club. However, this game system has been a very successful one, so only time will tell how many adaptations will follow. For

more information about this and other Schubel & Son games, write P.O. Box 214848, Sacramento, CA 95821.

Recommended Games

If you enjoy SF ship-to-ship combat, try *Fleet Maneuvers* by Fantastic Simulations, P.O. Box 24566, Denver, CO. This game enjoys a loyal following. It is noted for its detail and low game master error rate. Until next month!



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