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The Drums of War: Digital/Analog Convergence

It is 1:47 AM, and I am elated, and yet incredibly tense. I have just laid down the final keystroke on the first draft, after a marathon writing session that consumed much of the last 4 days. I am tired, intellectually and physically, and yet despite my relief, I know deep down my task has only just begun. I hastily post an announcement to the various forums I've been trawling for ideas and insight, along with a copy of the newly minted rules, and wait. Now the fun really begins.

For my final project in this class, I tasked myself with a seemingly simple goal: to design a basic set of tabletop rules for the Warcraft series of computer games, particularly World of Warcraft. I had a number of motivations for undertaking this project. The first was the potential of being able to finally explore the Warcraft universe on a narrative level not possible in their present games. The second, was to explore the differences in game mechanics and design between tabletop and online roleplaying games, to consider what works in a video game and what doesn't work, when bringing those mechanics from one medium to another.

The third and final motivation was as purely experiential personal social experiment, to experience the practice of game design in greater depth than I had before attempted by taking on a project of considerably greater scope than I had attempted in sometime, and more importantly, to actually bring it to something like a close, to experience the full development cycle on some level, rather than personal tinkering. This meant producing a complete draft, and releasing it to an audience of prospective play-testers, and exploring the mechanics on some level through the lens of other players and through actual play. While I had attempted a number of projects in the past, most were of simplistic scope, or never reached completion. Choosing a tabletop project also meant such a project did not rely on my own rather non-existent programming skills.

The men and women of Blacksky Company have gathered in the Goblin port of Booty Bay, for a weekly guild meeting and an after party, with beer and song and chatter, or at least that's the intent. I am present, as is my duty to Commander Blacksky himself, in character as Lokroth Deadeye, a veteran of the Third War turned mercenary, and for a time I do my diligence, bantering with my fellow guildmates, but after a while of this, it becomes clear that something is missing. There's no conflict here, no drama, and I like these people so I wouldn't want it with them, but there's no other outlet for such a thing. I begin to feel the whole exercise is pointless.

The tabletop roleplaying game is almost 40 years old at the time of this writing. While the first official publication of Dungeons and Dragons rules dates to 1974, designers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson were at work on early versions of the concept as early as 1971 (Dormans). Since then, the game has served as the primary inspiration for countless games, and indeed two whole genres, the CRPG and the MMORPG (Dormans), but the design borrowed has largely focused on specific mechanical structures mostly used in D&D, specifically the process of mechanical character development, concepts like levels and experience and statistical escalation through repetition. As Dormans points out in "On the Role of the Die", this misuse has become so widespread in computer

game circles that the term “roleplaying” itself has become shorthand not for the actual practice of roleplaying a character, but for this mechanical development. “A first person shooter that offers the player some choice for development is said to have some roleplaying elements.” (Dormans)

Yet while game rules, and character advancement, and the physical artifacts of the tabletop roleplaying game are certainly an important part of any definition of the hobby, these are but part of the experience, albeit often the only part of the experience replicated by digital analogues. At their core they are fundamentally about roleplaying itself, the creation of a fictional character and the inhabiting of that role, and the creation of interesting worlds and narratives (Pittman and Paul). As Dormans points out, roleplaying games are generally presented as more about “playing”, than about “gaming”, in other words, there is less focus on winning and competition, and more on a collaborative and cooperative experience and the experience of playing out one's role in the fictional world the players have agreed on. As Markus Montola points out, “role-playing can be perceived as a game playing motivated with narrative desires, focused on creating imaginary worlds and based on making decisions on how personified characters act in imaginary situations” (Montola; qtd. in Pittman and Paul).

However those narrative desires are often thwarted in an online game like World of Warcraft. In tabletop roleplaying games, “the fictitious world within which players interact exists solely in the players' imaginations” (Pittman and Paul). By right of their form, there are thus no limits to what directions the players can take the world and narrative in a tabletop session. In a tabletop game, one player, known as the Gamemaster or GM, takes responsibility for mediating the interactions of the players and ostensibly enforcing the rules, a role generally taken by a computer in CRPGs and MMOs like WoW. Having a human player in that role allows for infinite flexibility, whereas a computer GM is hardcoded to follow the rules laid down by it's designer, undercutting the ability of players to roleplay by limiting their available interactions to those defined by the game (Pittman and Paul).

The players in an MMORPG thus have limited options towards providing their own narratives and content to the experience of online play, which is why companies like Blizzard must expend so much development time constantly adding new pre-fabricated content to the game, to provide the players the new experiences that the game's limitations prevent them providing themselves (Pittman and Paul). They are also limited in the roles they are capable of playing, because so much of the rules are hardcoded into the game and thus totally unbreakable. Pittman and Paul use the example of a Dwarf, swearing off his allegiance to the Alliance and joining the Horde, a potentially interesting narrative proposition if well presented, but fundamentally impossible within the rigidly defined rules of the online game.

Blizzard, through their game, is thus granted the power of “perfect regulation” (Ruch), a near total control over the actions allowed to occur in the game world, and has passed it mostly into the control of an automated system in the form of the game server. But as Ruch points out, even within the game this can create a real conflict, as players become accustomed to inhabiting the virtual space the world provides, they begin to take on some sense of ownership of that space, and want that space to somehow be directed in the way they feel makes the most sense for the game world or their character, and that may not always coincide with the intentions Blizzard has for the direction of their game (Ruch).

Speaking personally, I have noted in the past, inspired in part by Lars Konzach's persuasive essay on “philosophical game design”, that to some degree the current direction of the game design of World of Warcraft contradicts what I see as the core principles expounded in the non-interactive story and setting material established throughout the game series. But there's little I can do about this in the context of the game itself. The tools simply aren't present to create my own stories, the game rules are set in stone and there's nothing I can do but to passively experience them as the designer intended.

Indeed, as I discussed with one of my playtesters, the most basic element of any narrative structures, conflict, is all but impossible to orchestrate on the players' own terms in the game. The only mortal conflict between players allowed is between the Horde and Alliance factions in the game, and to

a much more limited extent, to dueling and arena combat, none of which offer the flexibility or scale to organize much in the way of game events. In addition, the language system in the game prohibits any communication between Horde and Alliance players whatsoever, speech and even some gestures are masked by the system as unintelligible gibberish to players of the opposite faction.



Myself (right, "Allencard" in the chat window), a Horde Death Knight, attempting communicate with an Alliance Dwarf. Note the unintelligible nature of his replies.

It was however, a great desire of mine to be able to truly roleplay in this universe, to explore the themes the game itself leaves out of the day-to-day player character experience, and to create my own stories and characters in the world and have the opportunity to fully explore them in an interactive way. Since the game itself did not offer sufficient support for this play mode, I decided the natural course was to create my own set of rules for playing it on the tabletop.

It's now the next morning, and my game has been resting on the sleepless nets for a good 12 hours now, and already, the comments have been rolling in. Master of Ghouls doesn't make sense. Hammer of Justice doesn't explain what "stunned" means. I suddenly have the realization of what I've got myself into, and I'm not sure whether to be ecstatic that people are actually reading it, or horrified at the realization that my work has really only just begun.

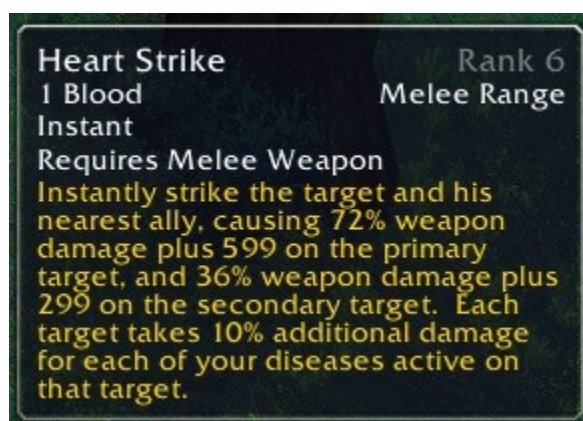
I began my process the way I begin many of my creative projects: with forum threads. Through the process of writing my previous essay on WoW's philosophical inconsistencies, and leading up to this one as well, I'd posted a number of threads on several forums, to start a dialogue with some actual players about the subjects of WoW's themes, the prospect of playing a tabletop game based on the setting, and about what defined their WoW experience.

It was here that I encountered a bit of a clash with my own preconceived notions about the direction such a process should take. My previous paper had argued the position that the extant systems in WoW, focusing on they do on the constant acquisitions of more power, in the form of more

levels, more abilities, bigger and better weapons and armor, and so forth, contradicted the theme of the Warcraft story itself, which focused heavily on the themes of “power corrupts” and of the dangers of greed and lust for power. With this in mind, it was my original intention to go for a very simple system, de-emphasizing the tradition of D&D style escalating character ability, for something that would be more abstract, focusing on only basic core concepts to allow players to focus more on the narrative angle. Much in the way that Mia Consalvo discusses in “Lag, Language and Lingo” with how grappling with game terms and lingo can interrupt flow state, the same can also be said for complex mechanics in a tabletop sphere. A system too complicated, or too focused on “game-y” considerations, can interrupt flow by forcing a player to interact with the mechanics directly and grapple with more metagame considerations instead of immersing in their character role.

However, as I read the responses, and began to similarly analyze my own impulses when playing the games, I found it hard to deny the allure of the acquisition angle of the game. Many players very much defined what they enjoyed about the game and their class through the powers it possessed on much more specific terms than I expected, and some players also clearly enjoyed the prospect of earning magical loot and items for their efforts in the game. And in honest self-reflection, once I started considering why I enjoyed my own characters in the game, I certainly couldn't deny that to some extent, I did too. While the narrative angle was lacking, I certainly was enjoying the other mechanics on offer, their thematic consistency be damned. Further, as I delved into the resources available to me that described the mechanics of the game in detail, it became clear to me that the way the game was designed, the different character roles were more or less defined by what they could do, and it became clear that some of this would have to be made available to the tabletop version in more direct form.

Now, certainly a considerable amount of simplification still had to take place, as the mechanics as written for the computer game are designed with the assumption that a computer is doing all the math, so of course they are all ludicrously complicated, involving often massive formulas and calculations that occur countless times a second over the course of the game. The game also takes place in real time, so many of the mechanics are designed around the assumption of a continuous flow of time, as opposed to the broken units of a turn-based tabletop game. Thus it was necessary to create a basic framework more familiar to the player of D&D and other tabletop games, with a standard turn structure, and abilities presented in clearer forms than is present in the game.



An example ability from WoW. Not exactly easy math to perform in one's head.

In addition, there are a good many of the abilities in the Warcraft game that exist for fairly simplistic purposes, being little more than buttons one pushes to do damage in the game, and can be rather repetitive even in the context of the game, but downright boring when brought to the tabletop. I felt it was important that where possible, abilities should have a unique effect. Many abilities thus had

to be passed over, though some remained as certain classes relied to heavily on them to be passed over.

Most of the design work then, involved the rather grueling process of examining each class, and deciding on which abilities were most important or interesting, and finding ways to convert them to sensible, simpler mechanics that could be determined with dice and basic arithmetic. A Shadowbolt spell that in the game is a convoluted calculation involving various stats like Intellect, Spell Power, Critical Chance, character level, Hit Chance, and so forth, is boiled down to a simple contest of two stats, and a subsequent amount of dice to roll for damage, keeping the flavor of the skill as best one can while dramatically simplifying the process involved.

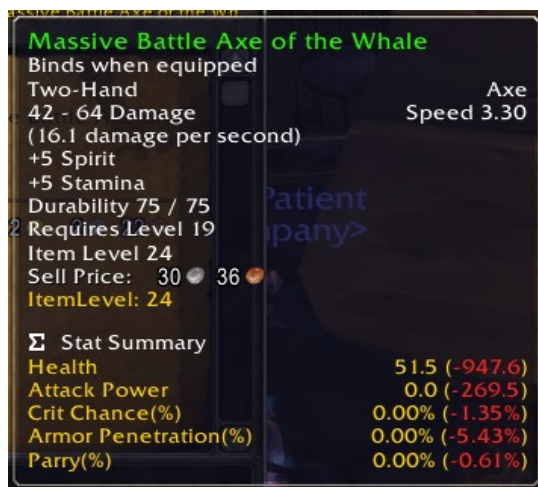
This was, ultimately, the second biggest surprise of the experience. I had expected that quite a bit more of each class' respective skill list would involve a great many more useless abilities than I actually found, but instead found them loaded with interesting gifts and abilities that were sometimes actually rather neglected in the game, but screamed to be included in a tabletop game where their utility might suddenly be more useful, or that were so important to the theme and concept of the character that they couldn't be abandoned. The end effect was to dramatically extend the development time required to convert each of these abilities to a tabletop suitable form. With 10 classes, and 80 levels worth of abilities to choose from in the original game, I found myself spoiled for choice, and even limiting things down to around 20 abilities per class in the tabletop version still left quite a lot of writing to do. What I expected to be a simple 10-20 page set of rules soon ballooned past 30, almost all of it from the class rules.

Eventually, however, this labyrinth of mechanical replications was finally navigated, and I was able to focus again on the core rules themselves, the basic flow of combat, non-combat actions, equipment and so forth. Here came what I feel were my two greatest triumphs: the magical loot tables, and the Corruption mechanic.

The magical loot tables arose again out of the analysis and commentary from the forum audience. It was commonly stated, and I ultimately agreed, that obtaining magical gear was a major motivator to the game, and while I did desire to reduce it's impact somewhat (a feat I was not entirely successful at, as we'll see later), I wanted to capture that feeling, as well as the flavor of the strange random names the game uses for gear, things like "Adamantine Chestpiece of the Eagle" and the like, that WoW inherited from Diablo before it. So I designed a set of tables that, when followed one to another, would generate both the stats for a magical weapon, and the name of the item, in a format similar to that mentioned.

All my narrative ambitions were not entirely lost to straight emulation, however. The Corruption mechanic was introduced early in the design, before even the classes were begun in earnest, and was an entirely original invention, intended to simulate the moral dangers present in so many Warcraft stories, as companion to the mortal danger the rest of the system focuses on. The basic idea was to create a mechanic whereby the characters would bear potential consequences for morally questionable or ignoble behaviors, or indulging in dangerous forces. Characters have a Corruption score, and whenever they commit such an act, that score goes up by one, and they're forced to make a die roll against the current value. So long as they exceed it, they remain true, if marked by their deed, but should they fail, they are determined to have fallen to Corruption, and the character is lost just as if their character had died to a mortal wound.

Once the initial design was concluded, it was time to elicit reactions from the community, and to give the game a proper playtest.



A sample random item. Note the unusual naming structure.

My notes are ready, my story planned, my group assembled, and I have begun to lead my players as GM along the adventure of Oki Kuma and the terrible curse that afflicts her. They have just charged into a group of nefarious Troggs, barbaric caveman-like monsters who have taken over the Deeprun Tram. One of my players, a Draenei Paladin with a broken Russian accent, has just rolled to hit with his axe, a resounding 23, beating the Trogg's Armor with 15 to spare. He's killed the thing before even rolling damage. It is at this point I realize I've made a major miscalculation.

Once the completed alpha draft was done, I posted it to the various forums where I'd been soliciting advice and comments in the run up to development, as well as dropping little tidbits of the mechanics in answer to questions about how the game might play out.

Almost immediately feedback came back from various members of the community, pointing out errors in the mechanics, asking for clarification, offering congratulations or compliments and announcing their intention to play the game at their earliest convenience. It was, I confess, a bit overwhelming. I quickly realized that the comments on the mechanics alone were going to take some tracking, and set up a wiki where I could keep track of such errors to eventually incorporate them into a second draft.

Eventually, I was able to set up a playtest session with several members of one of the forums, a small group, but enough for a start and to at least get a handle on the basic mechanics and how well they function. I designed a simple adventure, centering around a gnome that needs aid defeating an ancient Yeti, and had the players start at level 3 to give some wiggle room in encounter power, and gave each a free magical weapon, figuring they might've had such by this point had we been playing from level 1.

There is an old saying in roleplaying circles: "No game ever survives contact with the players." This was certainly the case here. Immediately a number of fairly surprising and major flaws became apparent just within the first combat. My monsters were far too weak to offer sufficient challenge to the players, and the magical weapons I'd given them to get a handle on how they played out, proved to be ludicrously overpowered, dealing far more damage than even many enemies much higher in level than they could withstand. As the adventure went on, I found myself adjusting the monsters to levels significantly ahead of what the players should be able to combat, and they still made it through almost unscathed. The final boss encounter went down too quickly, though he did take out a player's character first.

Ultimately, it was made abundantly clear that magical loot was far too powerful, and the monsters far too weak to provide sufficient challenge for any group worth its salt. Additionally, yet more errors were discovered with various abilities, and the critical hit mechanic I'd designed proved to be completely unnecessary in its entirety, being already well served by the carryover mechanic, where exceptionally skilled rolls added to final damage from attacks.

However, the session did prove quite rewarding for the players, who all seemed eager to be able to truly roleplay with Warcraft characters, and my lead playtester volunteered to run a session on his own for the group the next weekend. In addition, the game session, and the discussions afterward, provided yet more notes for changes to apply to the rules. An "Alpha 2" version was soon assembled and posted to the online wiki for the game.

The session has gone swimmingly, more or less, and I've culled plenty of insight into how the game works in play, but the greatest reward arrives later that night, when my British player awakens and makes the thread for the game he's running the next weekend. I make a short post reminding the players of the new version I've just wrapped up to test in the next session, and it dawns on me. I get to be a player next session, the very thing I've been wanting to do all along, to have a Warcraft game to truly roleplay in, is finally here.

On final balance, the experience of designing the Drums of War game was immensely rewarding on a number of levels, if exhausting. It gave me a greater insight into the game design process by presenting a microcosm of the development experience. It forced me to examine what I enjoy in my World of Warcraft play and in my tabletop experiences. It also required me to truly think and analyze what works and what doesn't in the tabletop medium as compared to the online experience of an MMO.

Most importantly, however, is that I now have a fun, if still in the rough, Warcraft tabletop RPG, that allows me to scratch both itches in a more social and creative way. I do not know that I achieved all of my design goals as they were originally conceived, I made some concessions to a more mechanical type of play that I hadn't realized I enjoyed so readily, but I did at least give a nod to the themes I started out with through the Corruption system.

The game may not be exactly as I originally intended, but it is certainly enjoyable, and I do not intend to abandon it just because this paper is technically concluded it. Drums of War will live on for some time to come if I have my way.

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