New Directions in Australian Roleplaying Style, Innovation and Responsibility in Convention Roleplaying

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Thoughts on 'thematic gaming' presented by John Hughes at the Second Roleplaying Forum, Sydney, May 1991. Updated slightly for Arcarnacon X, Melbourne July, 1992.

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"Art must ultimately be valued because of its capacity to improve the quality of life-- by increasing our sensitivity to others and our surroundings, by sharpening our perceptions, by reshaping our values so that moral and societal concerns take precedence over materialistic goals. Of all the arts, theatre has perhaps the greatest potential as a humanising force, for at its best it asks us to enter imaginatively into the lives of others so we may understand their aspirations and motivations. Through roleplaying, (either in daily life or in the theatre), we come to understand who and what we are and to see ourselves in relation to others. Perhaps most important, in a world given increasingly to violence, the value of

being able to understand and feel for others as human beings cannot be overestimated, because violence depends on dehumanising others so that we no longer think of their hopes, aims and sufferings but treat them as objects to be manipulated or on whom to vent our frustrations. To know (emotio nally, imaginatively, and intellectually) what it means to be human in the broadest sense ought to be one of the primary goals of both education and life; and for reaching this goal, no approach has greater potential than theatre, since humanity is its subject and human beings its primary medium."

Oscar Brockett "The Essential Theatre"

PART ONE:
Examples, History & Definitions

INTRODUCTION

This seminar was supposed to be about 'thematic' roleplaying. Its not, because as far as I'm concerned, thematic roleplaying doesn't exist.

So-called thematic roleplaying means different things to different people. Its also called cooperative dramatism or multiforming or `Sydney style' gaming. Let me group these titles together and for the sake of convenience call what I'm supposed to be talking about new wave roleplaying.

New wave gaming is just a tool in a box. It's always been with us. Its simply about taking notice of basic roleplaying technique. The tools that it uses are basic to our hobby.

There is nothing revolutionary about new wave gaming. You can trace its orderly evolution, building step by step from earlier styles. Nor is it an end: roleplaying will continue to develop as long as roleplayers trust their freedom to create.

Like all roleplaying, new wave gaming is about having fun, about being creative, about having the freedom to step outside the boxes that define you and for a short time be something different. Its about surprising yourself and the people with whom you share the experience. Its about collectively weaving a magic spell.

The fact that new wave gaming is considered new or revolutionary or even dangerous is a sad comment on the commercial interests that shape our hobby.

These interests that tell us that roleplaying is really about buying things--buying rules and buying ideas--especially sanitised, prime time pornopop ideas aimed at fourteen year old boys. According to their rules, Sexism is fine, but not sex. Violence is encouraged (boys will be boys), but emotion considered taboo. Militarism is fine, but fictional devils are dangerous. You can explore being a violent killer, but not being gay. You can be a god, as long as you portray women in traditional and non-threatening roles.

Commercial gaming (with some notable exceptions) seeks to free our imagination--but only so much. It seeks to channel our imagination along very narrow (and commercially lucrative) paths. It glorifies the teenager in us, because commercial gaming believes that (male) teenagers are its only viable market. I think they are wrong. However, until this situation changes, and commercial roleplaying starts catering to a universal audience, new wave gaming will continue to be a personal and convention orientated style.

In so far as there is a reaction to this in the Australian convention circuit--a reaffirmation of the basic creativity and imagination of true roleplaying--then there is such a thing as new wave gaming. That it came out of the Australian Convention circuit is only natural, because in one sense Australian conventions have always rejected narrow interpretations of what roleplaying should be about.

Gaming conventions in the United States and the UK are for the most part trade shows organised to sell products rather than ideas, dominated by gaming companies and distributors. We have escaped that, and so we've had freedom to create. Our hobby is richer for it. Australian conventions have given us freeforming, and they have led us away from narrow interpretations of dice and table work and rule book into a realm of experimentation, creative freedom and theatre. These developments have sat happily side by side with more traditional forms, and both styles cross fertilise the other.

So I'm really talking about roleplaying, not new wave roleplaying. Please remember that. You can't separate it out from the rest of roleplaying, you can't draw neat boundaries and say that new wave gaming starts here and ends there. There is no sense of hierarchy, no sense of us and them. It's basic to our hobby. When I say for example, that new wave roleplaying emphasises x, I'm not suggesting that other forms of roleplaying don't cater to x. I'm stressing this cautionary note because I know some people draw boundaries either in rejecting the more traditional approaches or in rejecting the so-called new wave approaches.

I've heard people say that DnD isn't real roleplaying. I've heard it said that new wave roleplaying is `brainwashing'. I reject both views. Both styles are about creativity. Both are about having fun. Both are about weaving magic, even though they do so in slightly different ways. Both are open to abuse. Each needs the other to achieve a sense of balance and variety.

New wave gaming is very popular on the convention circuit. I've already mentioned the role of the Australian convention circuit in encouraging our imaginations. I believe there are other factors that account for it as well. Roleplayers are growing older, and just as our reading tastes and our movie tastes and even ('Heaven help us!', I cry from the far side of thirty) our drinking tastes change, so do our roleplaying tastes.

Some (most?) of us here have spent ten or more years exploring certain types of gaming, and quite simply we want to explore new territory as well as continuing to enjoy the old. I can see myself relaxing with gratuitous *Runequest* bloodbaths when I'm eighty; however I also want to inspire my creativity with something slightly more challenging than new troll drinking songs. *Runequest* offers entire realms of myth and culture to explore -- and there is much to offer elsewhere.

Not that new wave gaming is limited to us dinosaurs. The brightest and the best players and designers are young, and fairly new to the hobby. As I've said, so-called new wave gaming is really about basic roleplaying technique, and everyone can enjoy it.

Finally, punters are becoming more sophisticated, and expect more from all their modules, be they adventure or thematic. I look back at the modules being offered in the early nineteen eighties--by myself and by others, and I get embarrassed. Today we have diversity and a degree of professionalism, we are all challenged, and we all have more to experience and enjoy.

Roleplaying as we know it, by some strange quirk of history, began in wargaming. Parts of that legacy are still with us, especially in commercial gaming. The emphasis on rules, dice and mathematics, the kill or be killed plots, the figurines and grid maps, the glorification of the adolescent male in all of us. It's interesting to imagine what roleplaying would be like if it began slightly differently, with a different set of assumptions. What would it be like if it began as a development of impromptu theatre, or non-competitive theatre sports, or story telling, or live action playing, or New Age religious dramas, myths and rituals? All of these approaches have good points and bad points; all of them are very different from the wargaming model that has dominated our history. They emphasis different senses, different

forms of presentation, different rationales. As a thought experiment, it helps us to imagine some of the aspects of roleplaying we presently ignore.

SO WHAT IS IT?

Though I've claimed that new wave gaming is really just basic roleplaying technique, I appreciate that there is a certain type of module that most of us would agree on calling thematic or new wave. Generally, such modules emphasise in-depth characterisation, atmosphere, and concentrate on exploring emotional or moral dilemmas. Before I talk about this style of roleplaying in the abstract, let me give you a few concrete examples.

New Wave is an Umbrella Term

Before I do that I need to narrow the ground. New wave gaming is just too big. I personally see it pursuing at least four novel, equally exciting directions, and I think we need to differentiate between them. I speak from my Sydney / Canberra perspective: Melbourne may well have additional styles to offer.

There is the mainstream emphasis on character, atmosphere and theme-based gaming. My talk will concentrate on this stream.

There is the `total theatre' stream typified by the *Epitaph* workshops, with their video cameras, closed rooms and lack of GMs. I'll come back to this.

There is the `two team' format being explored by Chris Wheeler and others.

There is the freeforming stream, with all of its ongoing developments.

Such a list is of course subjective, but it gives you an idea of the scope and tremendous variety of new wave gaming. If I've left anything substantial out, please let me know.

BEING THERE--SOME MODULES TO PUT IT ALL IN CONTEXT

In originally preparing for this talk (May 1991) , I conducted an informal survey in Sydney and Canberra to determine what people considered representative `thematic modules'. Four modules topped the list, and they turned out to be surprisingly representative in terms of conventions, themes and designers--male and female, individual and group. Luckily, I've played or run all of them, so I hope I can talk without seriously misrepresenting the authors.

In chronological order, the four modules were;

- *Persons Unknown* by the Cthulhu Collective - Arcanacon VII (1989)
- *Memory* by The Wyrm's Footprint - Necronomicon I (1989)
- *Sundowners* by Glen Fraser and David Arthur - Macquariecon `90
- *What Price Liberty?* by Robert MacLean - Sydcon `91

Other modules mentioned in the survey included *Malformed Creations* (Mark Morrison), *Five Sort Out Cthulhu* (Kathy Ho), *A Whiter Shade of Pale* (The Wyrm's Footprint), *Winners Don't Do Drugs* (Chris Wheeler), *Shadows In the Rain* (Gerry Huntman), *Murphy's Law* (Russell Waters), *Hotel California* (Paul Eccleston), *Something in the Heir* (WF) and *Grail Quest*(Robert MacLean). I make no claim to this being an impartial survey (A Wyrm asks you the question and to be polite you mention a Wyrms' module) and I note that it favours relatively older modules and Sydney / Canberra modules. However, it it gives us a basis on which to talk. All of these modules were successful in what they set out to do, and each in some way have entered our collective memory.

Persons Unknown by the Cthulhu Collective
Three session *Call of Cthulhu* presented at Arcarnacon VII.
Five amnesiacs escape from an asylum to discover their past and eventually wish that they hadn't.

Persons Unknown was technically a pizza (a mixture of elements), but parts of it, especially the first session, were intensely thematic. Five amnesiacs awake in a sanatorium to find that nobody has missed them, that nobody knows who they are. (1989 was a big year for amnesia and for flashbacks). In the first session they explore their characters and the tantalising fragments of memory that haunt them. The atmosphere is tight, claustrophobic and gritty. Chthulhuesque things begin to happen around them, and so in the second session we have an escape and a drawn-out tunnel of fun chase scene across the Scottish countryside. In the third session, a flashback, we discover the reason the characters go insane, how they are forced to deal with the otherworldly Celtic spirits that threaten them, and almost incidently, how they save Scotland from a nuclear disaster. The key thematic element of the third session is, in a display of cooperative dramatism, to engineer the origin of the phobias, character quirks and memories that were explored in the first session. Persons Unknown is a well balanced, tightly scripted module with a wide appeal.

Memory-by Philippa Hughes, John Hughes and James Townley
(The Wyrm's Footprint). Single-session, systemless, adult concepts.
A Short, Sharp Shock at Necronomicon I, October 1989.

Dead yuppies coming to terms with each other and with themselves. Five Sydneysiders bound into emotional triangles that become eternal. A traditional `haunted house' ghost story.

Memory is a bit like a Sex Pistols album--remembered mainly because it was the first. *Memory*, I believe, first formally introduced the systemless module format and `adult concepts'. I'm not claiming *Memory* was to the first to use these concepts, I'm saying it was the first to say so on the blurb. It almost completely abandoned plot in favour of intense introspection and character interaction. It was self-consciously theatrical, involving sound effects, design notes, briefings and debriefings. Players were encouraged to build a seamless module--a short intense period of total immersion in their characters. *Memory* also introduced and simultaneously exhausted a genre of total gamesmaster control. The players were dead (though they didn't realise it) and could do only two things-- explore the increasingly surreal house they occupied (with its mysteries, voices and `ghosts') or recycle their memories. The module used the device of GM initiated flashbacks to set mood and atmosp here. The flashbacks explored good times and bad, marriage, birth, crime, hope, adultery, and death. It was up to the players to seek justification for themselves and their lives, and possibly to resolve their emotional minefields within the context of the flashbacks.

What Price Liberty? by Rob MacLean.
A single-session, cap gun driven but otherwise systemless module run at Sydcon `91.

What Price Liberty? is an excellent example of a plot-driven module that is strongly thematic, and probably the best example we have so far of a module exploring an emotional and philosophical issue as its main theme. Its about the struggle for freedom, and the role and use of terrorism as an instrument in obtaining that freedom. Five IRA 'freedom fighters' of varying persuasions seek to unravel life, death, the nature of terrorism and the taste of Guinness while deciding whether or not to wipe out half of Britain with a stolen canister of Anthrax. The background presence of MI6 adds a gritty espionage feel to the module, and the use of cap gun props certainly adds to the tension of events. The module proceeds from the characters, who were designed to present a variety of views on the nature of the struggle between Britain and Ireland, and on the appropriateness of acts of terror in that struggle. It features a variety of button events that encourage players to philosophise--a wake, a funeral, hidi ng out. They must give eulogies, make speeches on gravestones and generally immerse themselves in being Irish (with a little help from the Pogues). There is the option for them to construct their own flashbacks to explore relationships and past events.

Mostly, this module ends with a member or members of the party killing some / most / all other characters, in a situation where nearly everyone is at least thinking of having to kill some of the others. Which I consider to be a very accurate statement about the nature of terrorism. Pass the Guinness. . .

Sundowners by Glenn Fraser and David Arthur. A double-session, minimal system module run at Macquariecon `90.

As France prepares to burn, five Anne Rice vampires flee from a powerful force that is trying to destroy them, and incidently seek to justify their existence to themselves and each other.

One hot module! Set in pre-revolutionary France, *Sundowners* is a tremendously rich evocation of the shadowy world of the Anne Rice vampire modules, sensuous, sexual and decadent. The module itself is very short--only eight pages. The main work is done through Glen and Davids' character descriptions --and what characters they are! A young actress recently taken as an undead; her materialistic lover / mother; a savant seeking to live on the blood of rats; a six hundred year old crusader priest; and a twisted sadist trapped in the body of a child. At times the module dips into a more traditional vampire genre--Van Helsings and alchemical spells and silver tipped crossbow bolts--and I think falters somewhat as it does so. However, these intrusions cannot stop the express train power of the opening vision, and the module ends with power, each character having to justify themselves and determine what makes their life worth living. Not surprisingly, some characters cannot. And so, Paris burns I

There's nothing like playing them . . .

I could go on describing modules for hours--the Australian convention circuit is very rich and diversified. I encourage you all to seek out these modules, and arrange to play them. If you enjoy new wave gaming, I'm sure there will be one or two on this list you haven't had a chance to play. If you haven't tried new wave gaming, then I hope these short descriptions give you an idea of what its about and what its trying to do, and just how wide the field is. I also hope that I've demonstrated how firmly new wave gaming is rooted in traditional roleplaying, to the extent that it is difficult to say where one ends and the other begins.

To demonstrate how wide the field is, I'll briefly mention *Epitaph*, which was a direct result of the 1990 Roleplaying Forum, and Past Tense, a wonderful module written since my survey and the first draft of this paper.

Epitaph Workshop by the Epitaph Collective.
A single session, systemless, GM-less experimental workshop run at Arcarnacon `90 and Necronomicon II.

Epitaph was a conscious bundling of ideas that grew out of the first Roleplaying Forum, and sought to explore a self-consciously theatrical style of gaming. Epitaph involved five ordinary people of diverse outlooks, ages and attitudes trapped in a subway train while the world outside prepared for an incoming nuclear attack. Or did it? It was after all, a ghost story of sorts. Some of the phone calls to and fro were interesting. The implementation went something like this . . .

Firstly, brief your players about roleplaying in three dimensions, about the roleplaying contract--providing each other with cues, and about taking responsibility for each other. Put them in a room made up as a subway train. Watch them on a video camera, use a pre-recorded 'radio program' as your source of plot hooks and use an intercom as a 'phone link' to the outside world.

In *Epitaph*, most plot cues were given via a prerecorded radio program featuring news, music and *"How Green Was My Cactus"* (An Australian political satire). Characterisation and character development were entirely in the hands of the players. The phone calls were mainly initiated by the players. Because of the possible tensions of the situation, we developed mechanisms for breaking mood in case things became too intense-- which they didn't. As we were using a video camera, teams received a tape of their performance.

Epitaph was an interesting and rewarding experiment, whose future was probably cut short by the theft of the camera at Necronomicon II. For me, the most interesting thing of all was that while Epitaph was intensely character-based, the actual performances didn't turn out to be thematic. There was just too much else going on.

Past Tense by Cathy Simpson
Single-session, systemless, adult concepts. A Short, Sharp Shock at Necronomicon III, October 1991.

Past Tense seems so natural, so seductive, that it is perhaps easy to overlook its essential brilliance and power. Until you play it, that is.

Take five roleplayers and a bottle of wine. Put them round a table at an imagined dinner party. Encourage small talk, introductions, a sense of friendship and intimacy. Gradually introduce the characters, and begin roleplaying, striving to

maintain that easy and relaxed atmosphere. The characters are five everyday people -- friends, lovers, rivals. One of them is interested in reincarnation, and is reading a book on the Christos Method. Why not try it? If nothing else, everyone will receive a relaxing massage.

And so one by one, the group, serious or humorous, credible or sceptical, attempt a past life regression. The Gamesmaster, performing one of her few inputs into the scenario, places a walkman over the head of the regressing player. Each hears a tape that describes a person and a series of events in fourteenth century France. No explanation is offered. The players must puzzle out the experience, accept or reject it, and decide how the experiences of the historical characters reflect on their own lives and relationships. There is a connection between the tapes and the characters, a connection the players are free to accept or reject.

Eventually the evening will run its course. In closing, the gamesmaster asks the players to summarise the effects of the evening on their ongoing lives, drawing together the threads raised in discussion.

Part of Past Tense's power stems from Cathy's tapes, well scripted and professionally recorded, that detail incidents from past lives in a sometimes harrowing or graphic way. The module reflects on the lot of women, both past and present. It is an excellent example of a mood piece where story, tension and action flow from the characters themselves. To accept or reject, to follow through a thread or push it aside as too threatening or too personal -- these actions all have meaning and import in themselves. Once the characters have been introduced, the gamesmaster has little to do except change tapes and hand out `image sheets' which summarise the regressions.

HOW IT CAME TO BE

We're now in a position to offer some tentative definitions of new wave gaming. Not to limit, or to include or exclude, but merely to explore some of the motivations behind it, and its particular strengths. Please recall my earlier comments--this is not `Us and Them'--new wave gaming simply uses some of the tools available to all roleplaying and applies them in a certain way.

Historically, I think new wave gaming descended from horror gaming --and in particular *Call of Cthulhu*. In the early days it was synonymous with horror gaming. Of the twelve `thematic' modules mentioned in the survey, only three are not horror. There are a couple of reasons for this.

The earliest RPGs were all power fantasies--they were about being respected, being your own master, acquiring material goods, power and reputation. They were a lot of other things besides, but basically they catered (and still cater) to our insecurities. They were about being a hero, being more than human--every day in every way I'm getting better and better, and I've got the experience points to prove it. They were combat simulations, pitting good against evil, centring on values of aggressiveness, confrontation and objectification. Unless the party turned on itself, no one lost, and everyone had the chance to succeed.

Enter *Call of Cthulhu*. Whatever else it did, *Call of Cthulhu* turned adventure gaming upside down. Players were victims--willing victims, but victims none the less. Rule systems, combat systems weren't that important anymore. If you played to the genre, physical resistance was futile, and the only sort of victory was surviving without too much damage to life, limb and mind. *Call of Cthulhu* made fighting only a minor part of roleplaying. It encouraged different types of characters, with different types of skills. For the first time, atmosphere and a sense of tension became central to the game. You knew it was going to get you, but you didn't know . Since you were going to die anyway, it encouraged you to enjoy your character while you could. You couldn't fight back, but you roleplay. Later games including *Pendragon* and *Trauma* also emphasised the mind and soul of the character as being equally important as physical and mental skills.

Those characteristics--atmosphere and characterisation, are central to new wave gaming. They are important in all roleplaying, but in new wave gaming they have centre stage. After several years of *Call of Cthulhu*, and almost in reaction to that game's gratuitous characterisation, there emerged a third characteristic of new wave gaming-- realistic portrayals of everyday men and women. It grew out of mood pieces, and of the shift from Lovecraft to other forms of dark fantasy--ghost stories and psychological tableaus.

Certain types of traditional horror literature have always emphasised 'the monster within' and our eternal struggle to remain compassionate, loving... and human. Even when cloaked in traditional forms, the monsters of our collective imaginations resonate with very human fears and doubt. Werewolves and vampires challenge the civilised veneers of our sexuality, ghosts evoke our taboos against death and the awareness that we all face a final extinction, monsters of all kinds evpose our animal natures, and the blind rage we often feel constrained within the demands of 'civilised' society. Horror literature invites us to take off our blinkers and look at ourselves.

So too with horror roleplaying. A hobby that began as an act of escapism was gradually turning back toward real life. From that emphasis grew the final notable characteristic of new wave gaming--its ability and willingness to explore real world themes and issues. Finally, because mood and atmosphere were so important to the stories we were creating together, we developed or borrowed a series of techniques and props--dark rooms and sound effects and multiforming and theatrical techniques--to increase the fun and the power of what we could achieve.

If traditional adventure gaming is about people affecting their environment

Character >>>>>>>> Environment

then new wave gaming is about the environment affecting people.

Environment <<<<<<<< Character

The five central characteristics of new wave gaming are

- STRONG ATMOSPHERE, INTENSITY
- FOCUS ON CHARACTERISATION
- REALISTIC PORTRAYALS OF ORDINARY PEOPLE
- WILLINGNESS TO EXPLORE `REAL WORLD' ISSUES
- ROLEPLAYING `IN THE ROUND' USING THEATRICAL TECHNIQUES AND PROPS

Escapism is basic to roleplaying, and it is a healthy activity. New wave gaming has its share of escapism too. Yet in focussing on real people and real emotions, new wave gaming provides a sense of entertainment and challenge that is different to more traditional methods. Not better, but different.

So, new wave gaming is about freeing our senses--all our senses-- to create an experience in cooperation with others. If roleplaying is about building illusions, thematic roleplaying (with other styles such as freeforming) is about building illusions in three dimensions. It encourages different approaches and it values different things to other roleplaying forms, but it shares the general commitment to creativity, imagination and fun. Rather than rescuing the princess, often the true aim of a new wave module is to evoke a certain atmosphere or tension. Both of these different objectives can be challenging, both call on roleplaying skills, imagination and team play, and both produce a tremendous sense of satisfaction when we get it right.

An analogy I often use when discussing roleplaying is that of a bookstore. Bookstores cater to a wide range of reading tastes--from science fiction and fantasy to Mills and Boon to Virago to Penguin Classics. They offer wares of interest to men, women and children. Entering a bookstore, you can choose anything from a racy best seller to a book of poetry without feeling patronised or labelled. You have freedom to choose. You have freedom to enjoy. We all have our favourite styles of literature--be it Mills and Boon or Frank Miller comics or tracts on upper Tibetan nose flutes. Yet most of us can appreciate something different when it comes along, and appreciate it on its own terms. Books bring their own values, without a sense of hierarchy or 'us and them'. Arthur C. Clarke is no more threatened by Joan Collins than he is by Jane Austin or L. Ron Hubbard or Willy Yeats.

I look forward to the day when roleplaying can cater to the tastes of all men and women in the way that a bookstore can. We have a long way to go. New wave gaming has added one more shelf at the back of the store.

WHAT IS PLAY? -- A BRIEF DIGRESSION

Some people claim that new wave roleplaying is 'serious' roleplaying. I disagree. For me, in new wave gaming we are starting to discover the 'play' in roleplaying. We have always known about the roles--and for a long time we had only a very limited number of roles to choose from--the fighter, the adventurer, the outcast. At last we are discovering something of 'play'.

New wave gaming offers us the time to take the material offered to us and twist it around, explore it, play with it. The time constraints of an adventure module means that other things are important--finding things, fighting things, doing things. New wave gaming offers us 'space to play'.

Play is a highly important yet elusive term in anthropology and psychology. Play refuses to fit in, to be bound by roles. It is a joker, a trickster. It avoids convention, it avoids being told 'you have to do it like this'.

Playfulness is volatile and sometimes explosive--and cultures try to contain the spirit of play and pack it into a number of packages. Yet it keeps escaping from these packages--that's how roleplaying started in the first place.

Our modern culture distrusts play and all that it stands for. I think the real reason for the attack on roleplaying from fundamentalist religion stems from this--it has more to do with the Protestant work ethic than with devils and satanism. Our

culture values 'realism' and 'reason', while looking down on 'fantasy', 'imagination', and 'myth'.

Play is no longer forbidden on moral grounds, as it was in the Puritan Commonwealth, but is accepted less as an end in itself than as a means towards other ends. Thus sport and the entertainmenthave become major industries, and games are encouraged among youth because they are seen as building character and teaching skills. But play for its own sake? Careful there, you might get brainwashed.
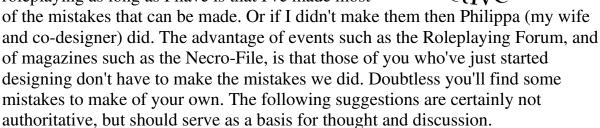
Play subverts the way things ought to be. It frees us to discover new ways of doing, new ways of experiencing, sometimes new ways of being. It is about disengagement, freewheeling, opening yourself to new experiences. The energies of play skip through our brains, sampling a little bit from here, a piece from there. Play can reveal to us possibilities, can help us restructure our views of what reality can and cannot be.

I believe that the challenge of new wave roleplaying is that we ask people to play when often all they want and expect is to enact a role. This is a subtle point, but it bears careful thought.

PART TWO: DESIGN AND PRESENTATION

PRACTICAL ASPECTS

The only advantage of having been around roleplaying as long as I have is that I've made most of the mistakes that can be made. Or if I didn't make them then Philippa (my wife and co-designer) did. The advantage of events such as the Roleplaying Forum, and of magazines such as the Necro-File, is that those of you who've just started designing don't have to make the mistakes we did. Doubtless you'll find some mistakes to make of your own. The following suggestions are certainly not authoritative, but should serve as a basis for thought and discussion.

In new wave gaming, we are both performers for and audience to each other. A new wave game can be more demanding than a traditional module, and the risks of

it not succeeding are greater. However, the rewards also seem to be that little bit better. Because of its experimental nature, a new wave game is more often the target of what we call the `zero five' phenomenon. People will either love it or hate it--but they will seldom be lukewarm about it. (Australian Convention feedback forms ask players to rate a module from 0 to 5).

A designer's responsibility is not just to produce a good module. You must;

- plan early, write early, playtest early.
- take responsibility for what you create, and avoid sensationalism or manipulation.
- playtest to an extent that most possibilities for the module have been covered.
- respond to the suggestions that come up in playtesting.
- provide trusted referees that have been fully briefed.
- respect your players. Build in opportunities for them to provide their inputs into the story, be it action, characterisation, or emotion.
- structure the module so it can be used effectively.
- advertise so that your audience knows exactly what to expect from your module.
- Write the module first; then desktop it. A pretty module is not necessarily a good module.

Most importantly, you must trust in your own vision for the module. Write according to your own feelings, rather than by copying another module or transplanting a book or movie wholesale. We all borrow from each other, but trusting your own ideas is crucial in building an effective module. Write for yourself, rather than for the convention response sheet. Decide early on what is important to you--having forty teams or having one team who perfectly understands and fulfils your vision (usually its somewhere between the two). (Convention feedback is important and often helpful, but its not what writing is about).

(Naturally, I follow all of these guidelines all of the time. Yep. Honest. All the time :-)).

SOME ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

Balanced, realistic characters

The problem in describing the boy next door to the nth decimal place is that the character you've designed is as exciting to play as . . . the boy next door. Any character description is a work of fiction, designed to provide opportunities for roleplaying. Dramatic life is not the same as ordinary life. The most memorable characters from literature are anchored in real people, but posses something else as well. Even if your aim is to have a realistic flavour, your character should not be realistic. (Real people are so boring. That's why I roleplay). Characters serve many functions--as symbols of some quality (e.g., courage, lust, resignation) as a foil or a complement to another character, as a vehicle for a set of ideas (e.g., a celibate Buddhist), as a source of skills or attributes (e.g., the gully dwarf thief with the lockpick). Think about what role you intend for your character, then think of what you will do if you find a player not coping or understanding the character. If the character is primarily a vehicle for an idea or attribute, ensure that the character has foibles or contractions to provide a sense of balance (unless of course the genre demands caricature). Ideally, IMHO each character should have the following attributes:

- Things to do--an objective.
- Things to feel--an emotional goal.
- Things to think about--a characterisation hook.
- Unresolved emotional or other dilemmas that can be solved by party interaction.
- A misleading idea about another member of the party.
- A source of tension--a strong difference of opinion or rivalry with another member of the party.
- Unique skills or knowledge; a clear area of expertise that is not duplicated within the party.
- Freedom to change.
- Freedom to make a stand.
- A chance to survive till the end of the module, or die a damned good death.
- Freedom to explore

The main characteristic of new wave modules is that they provide opportunities for characters to test themselves and, if they wish, to develop or change in some way. It may focus on character, relationships, ideas or ideals. Rather than providing plot events to propel them along, often the prime goal of a thematic designer is to provide settings and props to spark discussion and roleplay. A lot of this can be done through the character sheets--Sundowners and Past Tense are perhaps the strongest example of this. You need to achieve that difficult balance between characterisation and plot, between pushing them on before they're ready or letting

them waffle and wander into boredom or into areas of no consequence to the module. And you need to have backups-- action events or even dice rolling for that one team who had no idea what they were getting into.

Mood Breakers

Mood is a fragile thing. A good deal of the effort in a new wave module goes into creating mood. However, we need to be able to gently break it as well. Players must never be forced into confrontations or challenges they do not wish to face. If things are getting too tense, or too personal, or some of your players aren't coping too well with the end of the world, you have to be able to gently balance things out. Gentle, in-character humour is best for this. Encounters or other events can be introduced to change focus. A background intrusion such as music can also be very effective. (Music is surprisingly effective in creating its own mood). If all else fails, have an angel appear. :-)

`What I aimed for in the module'

Many thematic modules have very ambitious agendas that are completely lost on some players. Most new wave games benefit from discussing your aims for the module before you start play. Include some design notes for the benefit of your other GMs. Write a short article for the handbook. Talk to your players beforehand. Brief them about your aims, and listen to their expectations. If you feel bold, you might even introduce yourself (I'm constantly amazed how many GMs don't do this). A debriefing afterwards is always a good idea, and for complicated or emotionally draining modules, a must.

Playtest, playtest playtest! (and then playtest)

Have I mentioned this before? Do you detect a pattern? Playtesting is essential. Twice on Thursdays.

Careful with that blurb!

If there is one thing worse than finding yourself in a dungeon bash you thought was a multiform, its finding yourself in a multiform you thought was a dungeon bash. In these days of adult concepts and soppy emotional endings, it is essential that all your players know exactly what they're letting themselves in for. And believe me, you have to try hard to get the message across. (In 'Great Sage, Equal of Heaven', despite STRONG allusions to Chairman Mao and political critiques in the blurb, despite background notes, character sheets and pre-game briefings

explaining exactly what the module was about, some players expressed disappointment afterwards because `it was different to the TV show'. Lesson: never cross genres in an area where players have strong expectations.)

In the beginning was the module . . .

..then came desktop publishing. Sometimes we forget which is more important. A pretty module looks great on your shelf, but it adds very little to the quality of the game. As one of the people responsible for escalating the `desktop wars', I have to say that I'm sorry. Desktopping is great, but write the module first. Cover art never makes up for a missing second session.

PRESENTATION

Pre-check your teams

If you think there is a module mismatch, go and talk to them. Sometimes teams don't know what they've entered. Then again, sometimes they want to try something different. Even very young teams can handle a new wave module well if they know what they're getting into. Even Barefoot and Pregnant Bimbos from the Kitchens of Hell . . . :-)

Fully briefed GMs are absolutely essential

Some lonesome referees are notorious for hanging around registration desks waiting for desperate designers to allow them to referee a game. 'Just give me five minutes to read the module'. The quality of such efforts is, err, poor at best. It's unfair on you, on the team, and even on the aspiring referee (who might be filling in with the best will in the world).

Find out from the convention organisers how many teams you're getting. Don't let them wait till three days before the con to tell you. Playtest your GMs accordingly. These days, its best to get GMs' signatures in blood at least two months before the con, and then count on one in three dropping out, deciding to play, or revealing they've promised to ref three other games as well. Even at the con, you can guarantee at least one GM sleeping in or getting lost. Plan ahead. Be prepared. Have a backup. And then some.

The Physical Setting

Once or twice I've had the extreme pleasure of presenting modules in a drama lab -- darkened rooms with built in sound systems, plenty of space, props and controlled lighting. Sigh. I've also had to run atmosphere modules in a stairwell, or in a lift that had a constant stream of users, or with multiforming penguins bellysliding outside our window. Darkened rooms, candles, and no other games within cooee are a new wave GM's dream. Any GM's dream for that matter. Unfortunately, conventions are such that isolated rooms often are not available.

Again, plan ahead as much as possible. Most organisers will make special efforts if they know of your requirements beforehand. If things get desperate, you can do wonders with blankets, plastic garbage bags and masking tape (to the room, not the organisers). Look for hidden nooks and crannies outside the building. Put up threatening KEEP OUT -- MAD DOG signs. And if all else fails, tell the GM next door that you're running a mood module. She'll understand.

Try to set up your room beforehand. If players find a table with chairs, they'll use them, so if you want to multiform move all the furniture to the side of the room. At the right moment, turn out the lights. Light your candles or torches (some venues don't like puddles of wax on their floors--check beforehand). Relax. Enjoy. Now, can you read the module in the dark?

Dark and light can be powerful aids to atmosphere, but one needs to be practical. Players will need to reference their character sheets as they build up steam. Its best to leave the lights on till atmosphere demands their absence. Music can be a powerful aid, but too much simply detracts from other things. Sound effects are most powerful if they run for thirty seconds or less. Afterwards, they just become noise. Alternatively, chanting type sounds can be played at very low volume to get on players' nerves. Increase the volume when players expect something nasty to happen.

Simple physical props can add wonders to a module. (I have wonderful memories of throwing cardboard bricks across a darkened 'haunted house'). Paper handouts have their pluses and minuses. They are great as props, but the last thing you want in a thematic module is a table full of paper. Maps and other `god's eye view' aids should be avoided.

The Briefing

You can never do too much in a briefing. Introduce yourself. Ask your team how long they've been playing, and why they choose to play your module. Write all the players' names (with their character names) on the blackboard so they can see it

during the module. Talk about the module, what you're trying to do, where the slow bits are, what the genre and system conventions are. If you're multiforming, explain the conventions and gauge how comfortable your payers are with the style. If you want to use physical contact as part of your gaming technique, check beforehand -- some players do not like being touched. If you are awarding prizes, tell the players what the criteria are. Introduce the background, and then have the players introduce themselves in character. Getting everyone comfortable and relaxed is as helpful in roleplaying as it is in seduction.

Proceed slowly!

It takes ten or fifteen minutes for any team to find their feet, sort out character names, and size up their GM. Take things slowly at first and only gradually pull out the stops. Characterisation is usually difficult at first, and players need lots of cues to bounce around.

Roleplaying Magic

Remember that roleplaying is not made of words alone, but of sights and sounds, stillness and motion, noise and silence, relationships and responses. Something beyond words -- the energy of the group -- is paramount. Although imagination is very important, we don't roleplay with our minds, we roleplay with and through our bodies. Use all the senses available to you as fully as you can. Never forget spacial values, the signals of movement and physical relationship. Encourage your players to act out every scene, to visualise every room, to imagine every smell. Ask them about what they are seeing, what they are feeling. Trust them to tell their side of the story.

Some things cannot be said, but only shown, and the good GM shows us her thought and feeling by embodying and impersonating it, not by reading it out from the module. Similarly, roleplayers can express themselves just as effectively through movement and gesture as through words. You don't have to be a Laurence Olivier; simple or melodramatic gestures and movements can be informative, effective and fun. Trust your sense of drama and storytelling ability. Trust yourself to have fun, and to create fun for your GM and fellow players.

Always consider and try to balance the three elements--

- **Action**--gesture and movement, the prose and poetry of action
- **Visualisation**--all that comes before the eye, costume, props images.
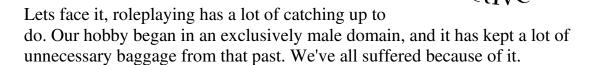- **Voice**--the spoken word and what it tells us about each other.

No single item is more important than another. Words support the eye, eye reinforces ear, and ear the rich and creative power of our imagination.

PART THREE: SENSATIONALISM & RESPONSIBILITY

THE UGLY SIDE--GETTING DOWN TO SOME SERIOUS DIRT

Sexism and Violence

Lets face it, roleplaying has a lot of catching up to do. Our hobby began in an exclusively male domain, and it has kept a lot of unnecessary baggage from that past. We've all suffered because of it.

As a hobby we have a horrible--yet sometimes justified--public image. Lots of potential roleplayers don't get past the violence and sexism that they see as the prime image of our hobby in most games stores. Until someone comes up with a playable Sensitive New Age Roleplaying Game (??!!), we have to make serious efforts to balance that sexism and violence in the area we can influence--convention roleplaying.

I'm not saying that certain styles of game should be banned, I'm merely suggesting that we need to watch how we market these games. When I see modules and even freeforms whose blurbs consist of little more than weapons lists or incitements to Kill! Kill! Kill!, I wonder if there isn't a better way.

Tackling serious issues

Some new wave modules have tackled what we might call 'serious' issues. At least one--What Price Liberty?--has done it very well. I'm not trying to put a wet blanket on such experimentation, but certain questions should always be asked.

Just how much can you do in a game? Even serious modules have to be playable, and need to be enjoyable. Whatever else they are, they are first and foremost roleplaying modules.

General theories of the theatre tell us that it is not a function of art to make a statement but to induce an imaginative response; the recipient receiving not an answer to a question but rather an experience. The point here is, 'don't preach--outreach'. Pose questions to your players by all means, but let them come up with the answers. Give them the freedom to use their own creativity. They won't let you down.

Sensationalism and Player Sensibility

'Wow! Suddenly roleplaying has grown up. I can write a module about paedophile priests who support communism in South America, or show that Jesus was really an astronaut. I'll rape a character in the second session--that should get a response out of them. Gosh isn't it wonderful being so-**adult** in roleplaying.'

Sensationalism is an easy way to get noticed that reflects badly on us all. The instances of sensationalism in convention roleplaying have been few, but they have been damaging. Players walked out of such games mid session. These modules worry me. They are not thematic gaming. They are not good roleplaying of any description. They don't work.

The roleplaying contract depends on GM and players working together, trusting each other, assisting each other. It depends on giving each other freedom to characterise, and if appropriate, to demonstrate a response. It is not about pressing single emotion buttons which say, be shocked, be scared, be outraged. Hitting players with an emotional sledgehammer is the thematic equivalent of a 'Stone Wall' (a badly designed tunnel of fun). It doesn't work, it destroys the trust in each other necessary for a successful module, and it gives all roleplaying a bad name.

You would think that playtesting and common sense would get rid of sensationalist ideas early on in the design process. However a lot of modules still aren't playtested, and many get finished only a week or two before the con. (No, not me. Someone else :-}).

I suggest that there is an obligation for convention organisers to screen modules, and to learn to say 'no' before any damage is done. As I've discovered in organising Necronomicon, if done in the right way, screening modules can be a lot of fun for all concerned, and a positive step in the design process. Designers don't mind people taking an active interest in their progress. A lot of good can come from it in a lot of different ways.

I'm not an advocate of censorship. I am a strong advocate of self regulation and of taking full responsibility for what we create. Since recent experience shows that some designers **are** into sensationalism and some convention organisers **don't** have the knowledge or inclination to deal with it, I want to open the topic up for discussion. I suggest we need some sort of roleplaying code for designers and convention organisers. (Come to think of it, one for players would be a good idea as well).

We need to avoid topics that are too close to the bone or that catch players unprepared. Some are obvious. Sexual violence, sustained obscenity or blasphemy, splatter porn, meaningless and graphic violence are out. (I would like to think that they have always been out.) Aping religious ceremonies in detail has a great potential to misfire and should be avoided. Designing characters around particular players and highlighting psychological or relationship problems through those characters (psychodrama) is just as dangerous. Modules that irresponsibly deal with explicit sexuality can threaten real world relationships among players.

Now some modules legitimately deal with these issues in a serious and sensible way. Some don't; merely including them for shock value.

Simply, if you are touching upon any adult, violent or psychological realm, it is your responsibility to make sure that players know exactly what they are entering beforehand. Prepare a handout to distribute with the character sheets, or better yet, put a warning with your module's blurb. Necronomicon uses a rating system that spells out module content. If you only discover that you have to deal with the rape of a player character when it occurs, (admittedly an extreme example) then its far too late.

These things are as important and basic as building a sound plot and giving your players freedom to explore. Both sides of the equation -- the mechanics and the social -- are equally basic to sound module design.

PLAYING THE GAME - SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTINUING EVOLUTION

There is a need for a sense of responsibility in all modules, with an onus on designers, convention organisers, gamesmasters and-players.

In thematic games, there is a need to target and advertise particular audiences.

There is a need to differentiate between adult and thematic and sensation-seeking and insulting.

There is a need to recognise our ongoing need for balance, and for a broad cross section of design and playing styles.

There is a need to discourage system snobbery from both thematic and adventure gamers. Roleplaying is big enough for all of us, and a lot more besides.

Most importantly, there is always a need to remember what our hobby is about-- having fun, being social, exercising our imaginations, engaging our creativity and entertaining each other.

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