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DIGITAL HERO

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Migrating from d20

by David McGuire

Level Design & Philosophy Part I

WHY GIRAFFES AND PLATYPUSES DON'T PLAY IN THE SAME POOL

In the last article, I went into detail about my first real experience with the HERO System; at the end of it all, I promised that in this article I would crack open some of the more crunchy pieces and get into the nitty gritty of point-based versus level-based mechanics. When I first sat down with the book, I searched for the familiar. Like anyone who jumps from fishbowl to fishbowl, I wanted to know where the walls were. Which walls could I drive up? Did the tank keep the water at a comfortable temperature? Could I get some of those little pebbles and maybe a plastic SCUBA guy in a treasure chest?

The answers to all of those questions were “Sure, just use these rules.” The tank I leapt into is a veritable ocean, and the only walls are self designed to create a sense of place and location, of look and feel, although that goes into concepts such as campaign design and combat balancing, which are future articles. We’re still on day one, comparatively speaking, and on day one I continued my search for something I understood: level based mechanics.

Unlike my quest for hit points, I figured out fairly quickly that I would not find anything of the sort in the text. At the same time I realized they weren’t there, I also immediately toyed with the idea of “building levels”; injecting my own control factors directly into the game, using the mechanics to literally “re-create” a level system using HERO. The answer was a resounding yes, it could be done, although I decided almost in the same instant that it would defeat the purpose. One of the major defining factors of point-based character design comes from the ability to ignore the constraints of a level-based system to allow the character to evolve organically. Going from one mindset to another meant letting go of the comfort of the familiar and putting a large amount of control back in the hands of the players. It meant letting my players develop their characters as they wanted, rather than as I had ‘anticipated’ them. For a control freak who’s accustomed to level design, or at least very limited point-buy design (which is a hybrid, more like LEGO™ block design where the pieces are pre-fit without necessarily being in a specific box) this proved a lot harder than I thought.

Here is the first really key piece of information: character design from level-based versus point-buy mechanics resemble each other like a giraffe resembles a platypus. Your average giraffe is a graceful herbivore that wanders the

plains and eats vegetation above the ground level, in the tree tops; an adequate analogy of most level-based systems. The structure appears odd, but clearly gets the job done. The giraffe eats regularly, it looks fairly good doing it, and everyone “gets it.” The design allows a certain amount of grace in exchange for options. The giraffe cannot comfortably eat the grass on the ground; that would defeat the purpose of having a neck long enough to eat from the upper foliage. In other words, the giraffe lacks versatility. It does what it does extremely well, but can not do much else.

Consider the platypus my first attempt at point-buy. In the level-based system, building a platypus becomes almost impossible. Not because the system cannot simulate the various abilities of the platypus, but because the numerous safeguards and the structure of the level-design force a certain amount of homogenization and create a natural “safety net” for the player. Said another way, almost no level-based system would encourage construction of the platypus. The concept is too “out there,” the power set unclear. Games like d20 work because their strict boundaries – the walls I mentioned earlier – are the ecosystem that sustains the environment, the players, and the threats within it. They also act as a purification system: everything that goes into the tank has to pass through that filter and be broken into compatible elements. Things that do not fit into the ecosystem are simply rejected. That “sameness” creates the environment that many people are familiar with, and moreover, don’t like. Without it, though, the system will not work, but I’ll get to that in a minute.

To expand on our platypus for a moment, the concept is a creature that can fight equally well on water or land. He should be fast, strong, with plenty of skills for hunting whatever platypuses hunt; in addition, we’ll want to add the Poison Spur to the attack repertoire, and a couple of “physical limitations” – such as “egg laying mammal” and distinctive features, like “duck billed mammal.” For reasons we can not possibly fathom, the designer “really, really wanted” all of those features in the original design.

But wanting them and implementing them are two separate things. I know this, because I get to watch my friend Chris, who’s extremely well versed in the system, talk me into letting him design a bigger, badder cybernetic giraffe in power armor. Now I just equated the giraffe to level-based mechanics, and the platypus to a point-buy. Chris does something that I find amazing; he manages to keep the strengths of

BY ANY OTHER NAME

The names of the maneuvers could be seen as lacking the appropriate gravitas. This is intentional; the mages that put the art together did it as a side note to their magical training and saw it as something done for kicks. If you wish to have the names of the maneuvers to be more impressive, the simplest way is to translate the names into Elvish or the language of Magic, whatever those may be in your world.

MIX 'N' MATCH

Mixing both ranged and melee maneuvers in a single martial art, which then allows single extra DCs and 3 point combat levels to be used with both kind of maneuvers could be unbalancing in some campaigns. If you find this to be the case then require separate extra DC purchased, and 5 point levels to be the cost for combat levels in the martial art.

The Staff Academy

 by Curtis Gibson

The Combat Academy for Mages

A school for defense and magic for Fantasy HERO.

A little over 300 years ago, Renovere, an Elven Mage and a number of his friends all got together to practice physical combat arts, to complement the magic that they were already masters of. As each of them carried a staff, and as it seemed to be the unofficial weapon of the mage, working with the arts of the staff is what they focused on. Over the next few years they met every month, and often called in friends or acquaintances from their years of traveling: master fighters, unarmed combat specialists, and of course masters of the staff. Their years of

practice and study produced a very efficient and effective art. This style formalized as they taught it to other aspiring mages.

This being a group of mages, the physical aspects were not the only things studied. Magic became an oft discussed sideline, and then added to the curriculum. Besides studying normal magic, and learning and teaching spells, the members of the Academy studied how magic worked, and ways you could channel and adjust the changes of magic through force of will. New magical techniques were discovered, and many spells were created. Still, the focus of the academy was the staff, these developments utilized the classic mages' weapon in the use and manipulation of these new abilities.

THE ART OF RENOVERE (CHANNELING THE STAFF)

Maneuver	Phase	Pts	OCV	DCV	Rng	Effect
Big Swing	½	5	-2	+1	—	STR +4d6, Strike
Interpose	½	4	+2	+2	—	Block, Abort
Knock It Out of their Hands	½	4	-1	+1	—	+10 STR Disarm
Hard Smack to the Chest / Sweeping the Leg	½	5	+0	+1	—	STR+2d6 +v/5 Strike, Target Falls
Passing Smack	½	5	+1	+0	—	STR +v/5, Fmove
Poke	½	4	+0	+2	—	STR +2d6, Strike
Push 'em Away	½	4	+0	+0	—	+15 STR to Shove
Blow It Out of Their Hands	½	4	+0	+0	+0	Disarm +15 STR
Channel Power	½	4	-1	-1	+0	Strike +4d6
Concussive Blast	½	4	-1	+1	+0	Strike, Target Falls
Distance Magic	1*	4	+1	-2	+4	Strike +2d6, +1 Segment
Up Close and Personal	½	4	+0	+2	-2	Strike +2d6

Skills

KS: Art of Renovere
 KS: Magical Traditions
 KS: Magical Theory
 Magic
 WF: Common Melee Weapons

Elements

WE: Staves (Default)