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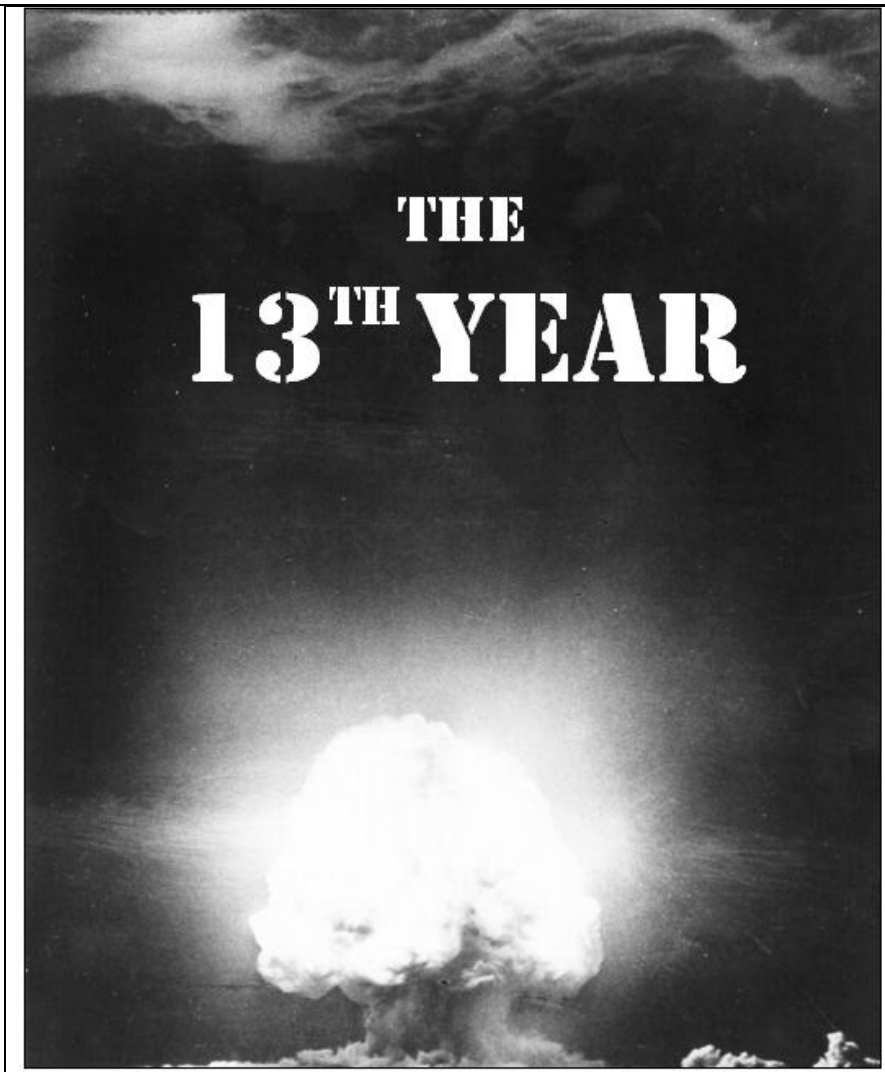
ODDS

The Tabletop Roleplaying E-Magazine

Issue 6 –March 2009

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ODDS
Issue 6
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EDITORIAL

It's been a very good start to the year for Farsight Games.

First of all, the SKETCH system got two very good reviews from www.thefreerpgblog.blogspot.com and www.unclebear.com, which has increased downloads of the free games substantially. Thanks to the guys at both these websites for their efforts.

Secondly, a new SKETCH system game called *'The 13th Year'* got its release a couple of weeks earlier than planned. This complete and ready-to-play post-apocalyptic World War Two roleplaying game - set on an alternate Earth in the year 1952 - had more than two hundred downloads in its first three days. Thanks to everyone who downloaded a copy and sent me feedback. The game can be downloaded for free now at www.farsightgames.com.

I've had a couple of enquiries about *'Scum Of The Universe'* (SOTU), a game I've been working on for the D6 System that I'm hoping to release once the Open D6 situation is fully sorted out. I would like to say here and now that I have no plans to release SOTU under any other system at this time as

it's entire design was based around the D6 system. If the worst comes to the worst I will look into other systems, maybe even release a fast-play version of it using the SKETCH System, but right now there are no plans to release it under any banner other than D6. If anyone still wants a copy of my original playtest design document then send me an email at farsightgames@yahoo.co.uk and I'll send you the PDF document. It's very rough and incomplete but it should give you an idea of what it is I want to do.

In the next few weeks I should have finished a complete 130 plus page roleplaying game for the SKETCH System called *'The League Of Seven',* a science fiction roleplaying game of political machinations and exploration. This game will have the usual SKETCH rules, a complete back history and guide to the universe, support material and an adventure… and all this in a PDF document for just £1.00.

See you next month!

JONATHAN HICKS
Director of Farsight Games

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www.ukroleplayers.com

The DAVE McALISTER interview

Dave McAlister runs the popular website www.ukroleplayers.com and, in his own words, is a 'dedicated geek'! Here he shares a few words with us about himself, his hobby and his website.

Dave, thanks for talking to ODDS. First of all, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

Thanks, it's good to be here. In fact, it's a little disconcerting being the one answering the questions rather that posing them... A little about myself? Well, I'm in the upper reaches of my 30's, married to a non-gamer, and have a 6-year-old son. I grew up as a Scaley Brat (that's military slang for the child of a Serviceman) and moved around a lot as a kid before settling in Dundee. I then moved around some more when I joined the military myself (the Royal Air Force). I now live in Nottingham and work from home as an IT support technician. The "dedicated geek" bit comes from the fact that my hobbies are roleplaying games and computers (website design/coding in particular).

Now for the standard roleplaying question - what got you involved in the hobby, and what do you play?

I started out reading the Fighting Fantasy books in the early '80s and was looking for something more. My 13th birthday saw me receive a nice crisp £10 note and I eagerly walked into Toymaster in Dundee looking to spend it. While browsing through the various games they had, the red box Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set fell off the shelf above me. Reading the back I was hooked. I spent many months creating my own adventures but not actually playing. It wasn't until a couple of years later that I managed to find a group and actually play. During that enforced absence, I'd also picked

up the Judge Dredd roleplaying game published by Games Workshop. My first ever roleplaying session was me running a game of Judge Dredd for 3 other guys (who had more roleplaying experience than me!) It was an absolute disaster! The next week, one of the other guys ran some AD&D and I haven't looked back since.

Over the years I've played most mainstream systems and gained a deep interest in the espionage genre. My current "go-to" system is Savage Worlds. I love the fact that the rules are simple but also diverse enough for any genre.

What do you prefer – playing or GMing? And why?

If you'd have asked me that question a year or so ago I'd have said playing. GMing took too much time to prep. Now however, with Savage Worlds, I can prep a session in the length of time it takes to come up with the plot. I still spend a little too much time on prep but that's because I like to include props and maps that enhance the experience. I still really enjoy playing though and have some excellent memories of characters and their exploits over the years.

www.ukroleplayers.com is a great community website - how did the site come about?

Back in the early 2000s, the RPGA had a dedicated group in the UK that ran its own website and forums allowing gamers to get in touch,

organise games, and generally have a place to chat. That folded when Wizards of the Coast took everything across to the US. In its place a group called Raven appeared (made up of quite a few RPGA UK stalwarts). Unfortunately, due to various difficulties it was a short lived venture.

When it became apparent that, with the demise of Raven, there would be no central place for UK role players to meet online, I set up a, very basic, forum on another website I ran. An extremely friendly gentleman called Tony also offered free hosting and a domain name and www.ukroleplayers.com was born.

What is it your website offers to the potential gamer visitor?

Hopefully, a lot! Seriously, the major part of the website are the forums. Almost every major roleplaying convention in the UK has their own forum there. The forums are the heart of the website and are what started it all off. It's only in the last year that things have expanded to include articles, scenario downloads, reviews, UK specific gaming news, and upcoming releases. There are also lists of offline and online shops within the UK that stock roleplaying products. I'm indebted to everyone who posts news items within the forums, which I then transfer to the main page.

Just how much work is involved with running a website such as that?

Too much is the answer my wife would give! Again, seriously, it's not that much. I have a team of moderators and co-administrators who help keep things flowing in the forum, and the front-end (i.e., everything apart from the forums) is very easy to manage. I'm always looking for new ways of

doing things though. Some work, some don't, but it's fun finding out.

How would you like to see the website develop? Keep it neat, tidy and popular as it is now, or go for Total Global Domination?

I'd like UK Role Players to become *the* place that gamers in the UK go to. We have a healthy hardcore of people who post in the forums but, of course, I'd like to see that increase. The dream is to make the website as popular as the likes of EN World. That said, I don't have any plans for expanding it beyond the UK – although I do think there is the market for other, regional, versions across the world.

Here's a question I ask most of my interviewees - the industry has had its ups and downs but from what I gather it's maintaining a certain level of popularity right now. From your point of view as an RPG community website manager, what do you see happening to tabletop RPGs in the future? Will they still be popular, or do you think other mediums such as online RPGs and console games will dominate?

Every roleplaying publisher in the world could go out of business tomorrow and we'd still be playing around a table in 10 years time. Maybe not as many of us, but it would still happen. Once you've bought the basic books for whatever system you happen to like, you don't need anything else other than your imagination and some friends. It's one of the things I really like about roleplaying games.

Online and console games will continue to dominate though because they have a larger audience to target. When I first started roleplaying the nearest competition was the ZX-81 and the Atari 2600 (I'm really starting to

date myself now!) Now, almost everyone has access to PCs, Playstations, XBoxes, and so much more.

  Of course, I'm biased. The only computer games I play are Football Manager and Sid Meier's Pirates. The likes of World of Warcraft have never interested me – I prefer face-to-face gaming.

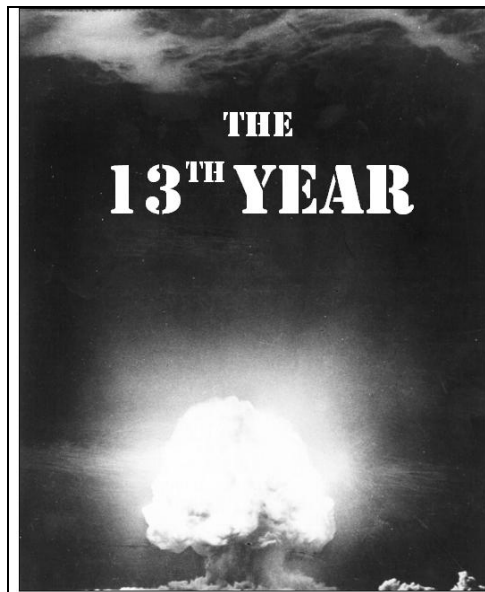**What does the future hold for you and www.ukroleplayers.com?**

  That's a tough question. I don't envisage UK Role Players ever disappearing. It's no longer mine to do with as I please. The community have taken ownership and I am just its

constitutional monarch (to borrow a phrase from a friend). I also have no plans to hand it over to anyone – I do consider it to be "my baby" (in a good way). As I said previously, I would like it to become more popular and, perhaps, seen as a good way for games publishers (big and small) to interact with their UK market.

  For me personally? Well, I'm still waiting for my lottery numbers to come up!

Dave, thanks for taking the time to chat with us. All the best.

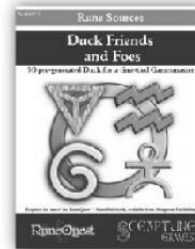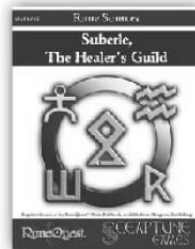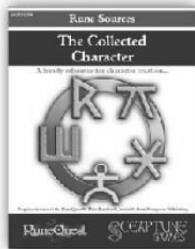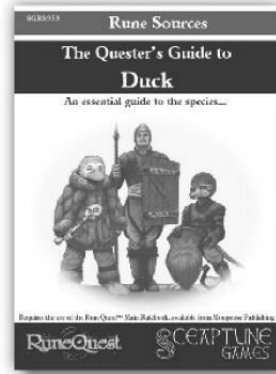 Thanks for asking the questions. I hope the answers make worthwhile reading.

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Mundane Items
and their
Place in Settings

An Article By Nathan Babbitt

As much as flashy magic and technology defines a setting, behind the surface the mundane, everyday objects make just as big a distinction. To that purpose, I've compiled a list of things worth considering, focusing on science fiction.

1. Transportation.

The focus on transportation has a tendency to be on the vehicles, but after a while all the hover cars, floating skateboards, and other vehicles blur together. Particularly worth looking at is how pedestrians get around. The sidewalk-street configuration of today could easily change. Picture a place where all the sidewalks are moving, or a city built on a roughly circular frame, with a series of moving rings, with walks between them, while they take care of orbital movement. In no gravity magnetized rings running on both a horizontal and vertical access, where people take rides on them. Things like that draw interest to a setting, and can have an impact on other facets of the game. Picture combat on the low gravity sphere, with people moving around at high speeds in different directions, taking cover behind buildings, jumping from track to track, and numerous other things.

2. Mundane Communication.

While communication links, radio, laser communication between ships, and other things are all common concerns one often overlooked detail is what every day people do for communication. Advertisements come in here as well. Possibilities are things like specialized paint which, when dried serves as a television, which could translate into easily rolled up moving advertisements, or little folded squares of cloth that people carry with them. It's a natural progression, things like MP3 players; particularly some iPods already have video. But the ability to fit a television screen several meters across in a pocket would be impressive, and this ratchets up another notch once the same thing is done to computers.

3. Medicine.

Very few settings don't cover the big things, such as regeneration of limbs, or dealing with other traumatic wounds likely to come up in combat. However, odds are good that those are going to be the exception for most people. Little things, like sprains, minor diseases more akin to the common cold than polio, and in many cases painkillers are overlooked. How these are dealt with can be a quick way to bring distinctness to different technologies. If one place used pills extensively, and then suddenly the players were exposed to a place where most medicine was handled through special fabrics, it could reinforce an alien culture.

4. Housing.

This is usually delved into, but often not enough. Military facilities, space ships, and other things that are more than background are covered extensively but houses are usually glossed over. Big changes, such as having houses primarily woven, can reinforce the science fiction feel. A house reconstruction would look very different, where people would unweave a few threads, and then weave in a different pattern around some sort of basic support. Different kinds of cord could indicate different wealth.

5. Waste Disposal.

The sewer is classic, and the place of many adventures in many genres, but in some cases there would be dramatically different ways of waste disposal. There could be ties to energy, such as the methane-powered generators we have today, it could be broken down and used in fabrication, and in general there are any amount of things that could happen. Consider the possibility of 3D printers getting more sophisticated, to the point where quite a bit would be printed, and similarly thrown back in the printer to be used later. While this only covers inorganic waste, on its own it could be an interesting prospect. Of course, this is one area where a tight watch would have to be kept, if enough is reused then the game play of taking everything anybody drops is going to be encouraged, as when you need a bigger gun throwing in a few dozen from defeated enemies, then printing out a new gun seems like a viable option, and recycling for material in general suddenly becomes more lucrative.

6. Energy.

While energy generation is typically covered extensively in settings, with nuclear power, antimatter generators, wind, solar, and the like often being a focus, the user end is more often overlooked. Even today wireless energy is in research, where rather than appliances connected to sockets in the wall, they would just be hooked up wirelessly through some sort of transmitter. On a grand scale this could look interesting.

* * *

Of course, with all of this there are considerations. Not everything would necessarily have changed everywhere, and throwing out all this at once, in one place is asking for overkill. It could be done, and it could be done gracefully, but it would be much simpler to just have a few distinctions that vary from place to place. One place might have a dramatically different transportation system, another the woven houses. This article is intended primarily as food for thought, and is in no way comprehensive, but one can hope that some thought is given.

Nathan (Knaight) Babbitt is an RPG enthusiast who has been playing RPGs since 2004. This is his first "published" work, due to the opportunity ODDS presented for which he is extremely grateful for.

ROAD TO RUIN

How to be an annoying player.

Sarcasm mode on

Every game has them, and you don't want to be the exception. Take a few tips from these ten easy to learn steps on how to ruin the game your GM has so carefully designed.

Number One: Make sure that you never talk in character. Its much more effective to say 'My character tells the Navy officer to surrender or die' instead of just giving the GM a scowl and saying 'Surrender or die, Captain Vud!' in the most convincing Royal Shakespeare voice you can manage. Keeping the gulf between your characters personality and your own roleplaying talents as wide as possible is an absolute must for all players.

Number Two: Always express your own opinions and ideas, especially when someone else is talking, preferably the GM. Interrupting an explanation or a piece of dialogue with brash statements will win the respect of other players. All gamers are well known for their tolerance for people butting in on their repartee. If you make sure your speech is loud and overbearing, you may even succeed in drowning out the other people at the table.

Number Three: Don't be concerned about turning up for the game on time. Arriving about twenty minutes to half an hour after the agreed meeting time is suggested, although three quarters of an hour would be a fine example. Keeping other players waiting is a good test of their patience, of which they'll need a lot with you around. It's good to keep them on their toes.

Number Four: Wait until a moment of high drama has arrived and then talk about something that has absolutely nothing to do with the game. Football or last night's television programmes are always good subjects to throw in. It makes the game unpredictable and sometimes quite surrealistic. So next time the GM gets to the part of the game where the final confrontation with the corrupt syndicate boss is just about to happen, make sure you come out with something like 'I saw this great program last night on telly, listen to this...'

Number Five: The game will progress much better if you don't actually take much notice of what is going on. Sitting in your chair and reading a book or a magazine while the game is in progress is a definite sign of good roleplaying. Every now and then nudge another player and show them what interesting things you've just read about, and when the GM looks upon you and asks what it is you want to do, just give him a blank look and say '*huh?*'

Number Six: Every time the GM has to make a ruling, make sure you disagree with it, or at least question it before grudgingly giving in. Plenty of games have been filled with hilariously enjoyable hours of players and GM's conversing over their interpretation of the rulebook. And remember - if the GM succeeds in having his ruling accepted make sure you're miserable and surly for the rest of the session. In fact, moan about it for the next few days. After all, the game is being

played for your enjoyment so why should the GM ruin your fun?

Number Seven: Wit and humour are what makes a roleplayer, so why not treat the whole game like a joke? This works most effectively when the GM has designed a game that's dark and sombre. Why play along with that, when cracks such as 'So that's an octopus's great wobbly tentacle! Fnarr, Fnarr!' and 'I'll jump in front of the female guard and shout "Get back or I'll whip out my baton!" Ho, Ho!' will carry the atmosphere effectively.

Number Eight: Cheat at your dice rolls. You may think this is dishonest, but look at it this way; won't your fun be heightened if your character succeeds at most of her rolls? Of course! Forget about chance and tension, just roll those dice, scoop them up before anyone else sees them and say you've succeeded. The game is supposed to be fun, so you want to milk that fun for all it's worth, even at the expense of effectively roleplaying a character that is on the front line of danger.

Number Nine: Take lots and lots of food with you. This may be the normal thing to do for most players, but make sure you take plenty of chewy sweets. Having your mouth full with thick toffee and trying to explain your actions to a GM makes the game just ooze with realism. So when the GM next asks you what course of action you wish to take against the soldier who is about to attack you, you can reply with *'Gile thwig ag im wig my shord'*.

Number Ten: Have you recently had a slight disagreement with another player over something trivial, out of the game? Do you want to know how you get back at that player? Well, the answer is simple. Use your character to spite him. Make the odd sarcastic comment to his character through yours, with the obvious reference to what you disagreed about, and then afterward say *'I was only roleplaying'*. Better still, have your character try to bump off the offending player's character in some way. Using PC's to settle petty differences are a great way to improve the session and strengthens the relationship between players.

Using one or two of these steps will make you an annoying player. Using several in conjunction, or better still the whole repertoire, will let others know that you are definitely on the road to complete roleplaying player mastery.

Sarcasm mode off

KEEPING YOUR COOL

*Have you ever had those times when, during a game, you
just want to go mad because of what your players are doing?*

  PLAYER 1 : I'm not going in there. I've been in enough crashed spaceships to know there's always something dangerous going on.
  PLAYER 2 : I'm not interested in the ship. I just want to steal the fuel cells from it and get out of here.
  PLAYER 3 : Let's just blow it up!
  GM : But what about the distress signal from the dignitary you picked up from the vessel?
  PLAYER 3 : It's a decoy. I bet it's a trap!
  PLAYER 2 : Yeah, we've been playing these characters too long to let them get nailed now.
  GM : But... (gets exasperated) What else is there to do?
  PLAYER 3 : I've got some explosives here! Three placements should do it!
  PLAYER 1: It's got nothing to do with us, anyway. We're just on this planet for some R n' R.
  GM : Nothing to do with you? (Starts to go red) But what are you playing this for? It's supposed to be about action, adventure... it's a roleplaying game, for f...
  PLAYER 2 : I've been playing this mercenary for weeks now. I don't want her getting killed over something that has nothing to do with her.
  GM : (Head starts to swell) But... but I spent ages designing this game! How can you just throw it away on a whim?
  PLAYER 3 : I've got fuses, too...
  PLAYER 1 : You show me the money, I'll show you the heroism.
  PLAYER 2 : I'm not going to get embroiled in something that has nothing to do with my character.
  GM : (Head swells with frustration into huge proportions) *Aaaargh!* (head explodes all over the room)
  PLAYER 2 : What a drama queen.

  It can be frustrating. You've just spent the last few hours designing a game and now your players are:
  Ignoring what you have done to follow their own agenda
  Want to mess about,
  Won't do anything unless they get something out of it
  Are more concerned about their characters welfare than they are with the game.

  It's important to keep cool during gaming sessions and try to emanate an air of indifference with what the players are doing. You should get dramatic at certain points to try and get across the situation you are emulating, of course, in the form of NPC characterisation and fast, action-orientated narrative but that goes as read. What you have to do is try to appear unfazed by the PC decisions. If you put on a face at a certain juncture when the players have decided to go down a completely different route then two things will happen. Firstly, the players will continue down that route because they see that you haven't allowed for it, and the more safety-conscious

players will go down that path because they stand a better chance of survival. Secondly, they'll lose that sense of free will. They've obviously made the wrong choice of direction and seeing that the GM isn't prepared for this will make them think that if they did take the path shown to them then they've been railroaded into it. The prime enjoyment of play is thinking that you're playing in a world where anything is possible and being expected to travel down the road shown is a little linear.

Losing control of yourself is disastrous. If you get irate, angry, frustrated, annoyed - basically, if you get emotional about what the players are doing out of the context of the game – then that will obviously reduce the players enjoyment. Watching you pull faces, clench your fist, mutter under your breath about 'damnable players' and basically lose your edge will more or less stop the game dead and also lessen the tone of future games as the players wait for the carrot on the stick and your angry reactions to their decisions.

So let's address each of the major game problems one by one.

(A) Ignoring what you have done to follow their own agenda

It can be annoying when the players turn left instead of right. What you've got to remember is that designing a game that basically signposts the players through an adventure (as is the case with many published adventures) can be dangerous to the atmosphere. Many players, especially those with long experience and well-played characters, will not respond as eagerly to the next step of a scenario as they used to. They'll be more willing to go off on their own and try to get what they can from the game. This is one of the problems with creating a setting with depth that the players have interacted with for a long time. They'll take their time recruiting old NPC's they met, or travelling to far-off locations to get items they might need for the adventure. A scenario designed for a few hours can suddenly double in length.

It's quite simple. You can't just say 'you can't do that' or simply say that the starship has broken down for the umpteenth time to keep the players in one place. All you have to do is make sure that the situation is urgent, and flying about the galaxy getting help or advice will reduce their chances of getting the job done. You could run a couple of games where the players *do* go for help, and when they get back it's too late; the bad guy has had time to fortify defences or carry out their nefarious scheme. Or they could get back and the difficulty of the game has increased over the time they've been away. As a drastic measure, any NPC's they recruited could get seriously hurt, even killed, over what the players had planned. This will make them wary next time they decide to drag someone or something else in to help them. Don't get annoyed. It won't be the fact that they'll feel that their path has been predestined, it'll be because they'll think you're being childish with them and that runs the risk of stopping the games altogether.

(B) Want to mess about

You've spent ages designing and drawing and speculating, and when it comes down to it, the players are just flicking paper at each other and making jokes.

First, make sure it's not something *you've* done wrong. Could the game be unoriginal, repetitive or just plain boring? Take a long hard look at what you are doing and be honest with yourself; would *you* play the game you've designed? There are other articles in this book about games becoming dull and a little stagnant, so take a look at them to see if you can change that.

Secondly, simply make a note of what players are enjoying it and concentrate on them. The players who are ruining it will either get bored or leave you to it, or they'll try to take a little more interest and get involved again.

Losing your temper over this will not just ruin the game, it may ruin any friendships you have. Playing the role of dictator and telling the players what they can and can't do in the context of real life (which is how they'll see it) will make them look at you in a different light. It can be stressful, so be diplomatic; even join in a little to help defuse the situation and get the messing about out of their system.

(C) Won't do anything unless they get something out of it

This one is simple. All you have to do is ask them, what *do* they want out of it? If they say enjoyment and adventure then they've answered your question and they'll be more willing to take part in the game for the purposes of adventure. If they say they want as many credits or gadgets as possible then ask them this; what do they intend to do with them *after* the game is over? What do *you* remember from the games you enjoyed; was it the fact that you made thousands of credits or was it because you foiled the schemes of the bad guy in a cool and heroic way? Making all that money in the game is good but it's ultimately false; you can't spend them when the game is over! The fun from the game is the adventure, not the reward.

Getting upset over this will only make the players feel that they are expected to do something for nothing (as strange as that may sound) and they'll be less willing to take the scenario or campaign to its conclusion. Keep calm and give them their reward, doing it one of two ways. One, you could give them a reward which is the best they could get from the location they are in but, in reality, isn't much. Or give it to them and then take it all away! That may sound a little drastic, but it could lead into a game where the players try to get it back. You'll be surprised how strongly they get involved *then*!

(D) Are more concerned with their character's welfare than they are with the actual game

This one is simple, too. If the players won't get involved with an action adventure because they are worried about what will happen to the personality they have nurtured, then ask them, *what the hell are you playing this for?*

Roleplaying games are usually about heroes, action adventure, dramatic melodrama and personal strength. It's *not* about skulking out of harm's way, making sure there's no danger to the character and basically spending the game fretting about what might happen.

Don't just ball your fists and shout, *for God's sake, do something!* Just make sure the players have to do something risky to complete the game. If they don't, they fail, and to compound the problem those who stood to lose a lot from the game's failure look them upon with some distaste. This can seriously motivate a player to do the right thing. Getting upset will only communicate to the player that they are not doing what you want them to do and the sense of free will goes out the window and lands in a passing garbage scow.

* * * *

In many respects it has a lot to do with the players and GM's feelings towards how seriously they want to take the games and just what the individual participants hope to gain. Make sure you take into account everyone's involvement with what you think is going on. Some of those present will only feel that they are being unjustifiably included in your plots, and, in extreme cases, your frustration.