Play Dirty
by John Wick

Dirty Fighting

(or, How to Make It Hurt Like Hell)

Small Forward

A few folks have been commenting that while my column is very entertaining (I *hope* so!), it wasn't very useful to them. I can understand that. I've often found that teaching through example and anecdote is the best method, but then again, I've also found that occasionally, I've got to change my tone and style to keep the rest of the audience awake.

And so, this month, we're going to take a break from the whole "there was this time in band camp" voice and get down to the nitty gritty.

Let's you and me roll up our sleeves and get some licks in. Let's fight.

* * *

I know what you need. Oh, yes. I do.

You have a problem with the way your game is playing, but you can't quite put your finger on what's wrong. But I know what's wrong. Oh, yes. I do.

It's your fight scenes. Quite frankly, they're not very exciting. Don't worry, it's not your fault. You just been taught poorly. Never blame the student, always blame the teacher. "Teacher say, student do" as Mr. Miyagi would say.

You see, *you* think the excitement of a combat scene comes from the uncertainty of dice rolls. Like I said, it isn't your fault. This is what you've been told all your life. Well, we're going to take care of that. Right here, right now. I'm gonna show you some nasty, dirty, rotten, low-down tricks to make your combat system fly. Your players will forget about their dice entirely because their hands will be too busy gripping the edge of the game table with excitement, fear and anticipation.

Make It Hurt

Let's start with a basic problem. They're called hit points. They're also called wounds, stamina points and a few other pretty names, but when all's said and done, they're hit points.

Players believe that hit points make them safe. "I can still fight," they tell themselves. "I'm only down ten hit points!" They'll continue to fight until they reach the Level of Uncertainty - - "I've got 15 hit points left! Gotta make it back to the cleric!" - - and run away. This is an easy one to solve.

Take the hit points away.

There are a few ways to do this. We'll look at each one individually, then at the end, we'll see how they all work together.

Realistic Combat

All too often, when running games that I didn't write, I encounter a small problem. Combat lasts too long. See, I've studied on this subject. Did a bit of kung fu and kenjutsu and judo and even gotten into a good old fashioned slobberknocker or two (thanks, J.R.) and let me tell you from the voice of experience, fights usually come down to one hit. Just one. That one hit stuns the other guy for just long enough for you to give him an even *better* hit, and then he's on the ground and then, it's all over. Except for the kicking. He never gets up from the kicking.

In my head, this is how combat in roleplaying games *should* work. I already hear the shouts of "But that's not very heroic!" Let me ask you a serious - - and I mean *serious* - - question. What's more heroic: charging into a situation that you know you can't lose, or charging into a situation that may very well kill you? What act demands more courage? More guts? More "intestinal fortitude"? I think we know the answer to that one.

So, here's what you do. Take away hit points entirely. No hit points. You get hit, you get hurt. You get hit again, you get killed. (That's how *Orkworld* is gonna work, but that's for another column.)

"But players wouldn't stand a chance!"

Oh, yes they would. If they fought with the wisdom of Sun Tzu they would. If they fought with the cunning of Musashi, they would. But usually, they don't, which means they end up making another character by the end of the night.

Hidden Hit Points

A lot of folks call this the "Jonathan Tweet Solution," but I learned it from a guy named Danny Beech in Albany, Georgia, so I call it what he called it: "Hidden Hit Points." In short, all you do is keep track of all the damage rolls and hit point totals. The players *never know* how many hit points they have. Ever.

Oh, they've got a rough idea. The cleric knows he's rolling d8s and the fighter knows he's rolling d10s and the thief knows he's rolling d6s, but they never know for sure.

Narrative Combat

"But how do they know how hurt they are?" you ask. Just make sure you use another little trick called "Narrative Combat." Those of you who've practiced some martial art or another know how combat *really* works. You get hit, you get hurt. That's what combat is *supposed* to do: hurt your opponent. So, when you run combat sessions, make sure to enforce the hurt.

Never let your players say, "I roll to hit". You know what they're doing, you want to know *how* they're doing it. Ask them important questions like:

?Where are you trying to hit him?

?How hard are you trying to hit him?

?Is this a real strike, or a feint?

Go on, ask them those questions. Then, give them *game bonuses* when they give you the answers. Give them *bigger* game bonuses when they do it themselves.

On the reverse end of things, make sure that whenever characters get hit, they *get hurt*. Ten Hit Points of damage doesn't tell you *anything*. Instead, keep track of *where* characters get hit and *how hard* they got hit. Here's an easy way of doing it.

First, write down how many hit points each character has.

Next, figure out a 10% loss of hit points, a 20% loss of hit points, a 25% loss of hit points, etc. Do this *before* the game begins. Be prepared. Then, assign descriptions to each HP loss. In other words, a 10% hit is a flesh wound. No big deal. But a 25% hit is a crippling hit, one that causes major blood flow, loss of sensation in the limb (if that's the head, you've got problems . . . okay, *he's* got problems).

Finally, when a player takes a hit, describe it in the most visceral way possible. (Multiple viewings of *Saving Private Ryan* or *Ravenous* may be appropriate for you to get into the right frame of mind.) If a player takes a 25% hit to the left arm, his fingers go numb, blood sprays in his face on regular intervals and the pain shoots up his arm, into his neck just behind his eyes. Don't forget the fact that all the pressure in his blood stream is now compromised, making his heart beat a lot faster and a lot stronger as it tries to compensate. He'll lose a bit of his vision from the pain, experience disorientation and possibly black out from the tissue trauma.

(For those of you who don't know, "tissue trauma" is what kills you when you get shot in the foot. Everything in your body is under constant pressure. When you get a wound, you get tissue trauma. The insides of your body try to force themselves outside by the sudden change of pressure and the whole body suddenly goes into shock. Just imagine your body as the interior of a jet plane that just lost cabin pressure. Just so's you know.)

One of the objectives of the *7th Sea* game system was to do this: encourage players to use words like "feint" and "beat" and "riposte." If they're *right there* on the character sheet, players will use them. If they don't know they can do it, they won't do it. Which leads us to our next section . . .

Creative Combat

I remember the first time someone looked at me from across the GM Screen and said, "You know the rules don't cover this, but I'd like to try it anyway."

Like I said a moment ago, if players don't know they can do something, they won't do it. Experimental players are rare in the extreme. All too often, they think, "Well, there's no rule for it, so I can't do it."

This mentality is in *direct violation* of the Roleplaying Prime Directive: *If there isn't a rule for it, make it up.* (Of course, a lot of people have forgotten this rule, but that's a subject for another column.)

No game master or game system can cover *every* contingency, but that doesn't mean that your players should be punished when they come up with something both you and the rules never counted on. In fact, they should be *rewarded*.

The Wounding Skill

Hidden Hit Points not only get you a neat way of making characters edgy during combat, it also opens up other, very useful, rules. Like the Wounding Skill. Here's how it works.

If you spend a lot of time fighting (like fighters) or healing (like healers), you get to know how bad a wound is just by looking at it - - or poking your fingers around in it, whichever works for you. Thus, the Wounding Skill. Folks who spend a lot of time fighting or healing can take a look at a wound and say, "Wow! That wound was a) slight, b) serious, c) grievous, d) crippling, or e) fatal. Eventually, if they get into enough fights, other characters - - besides the fighters and healers - - can figure this skill out, too.

Fight Dirty, Fight Smart

Now, let's spend a moment talking about villains.

Your players face off against a villain. There's only one of him and an average of 4.5 of them. He's built off the same number or a greater number of points/is one or three levels higher . . . you get the picture. But, there's 4.5 of them. He's vastly outnumbered. He's in deep trouble, right?

Wrong. *They're* the ones in trouble. Why? Because my villains know how to fight. Here's what happens.

The Wisdom of Sun Tzu

If you haven't read *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, do so now. Right now. You will learn more about strategy and warfare (and how they are a part of everyday life) in those few pages than you'll learn anywhere else.

My villains are students of Sun Tzu's teachings. They understand that in order to face an enemy of greater number, you have to get allies. And sometimes, the ground you stand on can be your ally. In this case, our heroes have infiltrated his lair and caught him "off guard."

This is a mistake. Fighting a villain in his own lair, where he knows the terrain and

they do not, is to his advantage. He knows all the safe places to hide. He knows where all the tricks and traps are. He's not alone; he has his lair on his side. And, because Carter's an Eagle Scout who follows the Scout's motto, he's prepared for such a contingency.

He has nerve gas to stun any characters who are susceptible to it. He has the floor wired for electrocution. He can kill the lights, grab the hidden infrared goggles and proceed to kick ass. He's ready for them. Of course, when it comes to ass kicking, Joe Villain follows the advice of another master of martial arts . . .

The Ruthlessness of Musashi

Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings* is another study in tactics, but on a more personal level. Musashi said, "With my way, one man can beat ten, ten can beat one hundred and one hundred can beat one thousand." Or something like that. Musashi understood one very important fact about one-on-one fighting: If you don't use every method at your disposal to win, you're not only a fool, but you're a fool on the wrong end of a 4 foot razor blade. Congratulations, that makes you a dead fool: doubly disqualified from the game of life.

When Joe Villain fights, he fights dirty.

First, he tries to gouge the eyes. Hey, if you can't see, you can't fight. One hit, you're on the ground and the kicking starts.

Then, he kicks you in the knees. Hey, you can't stand, you can't fight. One hit, you're on the ground and the kicking starts.

Then, he kicks you in the groin. Or, he makes cuts above your brow, so blood oozes down into your eyes. Or, he makes cuts on your hands and wrists so the pain slows down your thrusts and parries and makes your palms and fingers slick from blood. Or, he hits you in the face with the pommel of his sword so you're stunned for just a moment, which gives him enough time to put 4 feet of steel through your heart.

I've been to wrestling camp, folks. I've been taken down by my thumb. *My thumb*. You *don't* want to know how that feels. Trust me.

So, your next combat should sound like this:

?/P>

* * *

?/P>

PLAYER
I roll to hit. Succeed. Roll to damage. Ten hit points.

GAME MASTER
The villain grabs your sword arm (dice roll). He succeeds. You can't use your sword next round because your sword arm is tangled up.

PLAYER
Uh. Okay. Roll for initiative?

GAME MASTER
Sure. But you subtract two from your roll because you're surprised. (dice roll) You lose?

PLAYER
Uh, yeah.

GAME MASTER
All right. He twists your arm. He rolls Strength. You roll Stamina. He gets a +5 because he's got an arm bar on you.

PLAYER
Uh, okay. (dice roll)

GAME MASTER
All right. The villain won. He takes you down to the ground. Now, he's on top of you. You're face down on the ground. He's got your arm behind you, and your shoulder's making strange sounds. He grabs hold of your hair and pulls your head up just before it comes slamming down into the castle's stone floor.

* * *

Notice: Not once did you mention hit points.

Fighting Dirty is just like Playing Dirty: use everything at your disposal. Throw tapestries on them and pull them out from under their feet. Throw a bucket of flammable liquid on them then swing torches in their faces. Kick, bite and gouge. Hit them in the soft places that bone doesn't protect. How did *you* react when Tyson bit off a piece of Holyfield's ear? That's how you were *supposed* to react. Unfortunately, it just pissed Holyfield off, but the plan was solid. If it stunned you for even a *second*, it worked. You'd be on the floor and then there'd be kicking.

(Of course, my wife just walked in and notified me that the word I should use instead of kicking is "stomping." But then again, she's always been a lot meaner than me. Smarter, too. And prettier. Get the impression she's reading over my shoulder?)

Losing hit points doesn't hurt. Losing an ear does.

Just ask Holyfield.

[Past Columns]

Article publication date: January 21, 2000

---

261 *Pyramid* subscribers rated this article **3.89** on a scale of 1 to 5. Visit the [ratings page] for more info.