

Exploring Potential Abuses in Traditional Roleplaying Games

There are four basic types of gamer – the Rules Lawyer, the Team Player, the Casual Player and the Power Gamer. Since the majority of storytellers (Gamemasters) come from the ranks of gamers, it is logical to assume that most GMs will be a mix of these types, with the team player (hopefully) predominant. Of these types, only the **Team Player** will really care about whether the game is balanced, and thus, take steps to prevent abuse within the game itself. Why?

Simple. Whatever you may have read in print, and despite what game designers might want you to experience in your own gaming, most players are people conditioned by their culture. And most cultures define success in life (or any other endeavor) as Winning and Losing. Despite the story-based, supposedly ‘noncompetitive’ nature of most roleplaying games, the fact is, people compete in these settings. Whether we like it or not, players strive against one another, the GM, and the rules to come out on top. So, with all this competition, who will make sure there’s a level playing field?

The **Rules Lawyer** won’t. He cares only about the written rules, not the implied Social Contract. His goal is to acquire power in the game setting, within the strict limits – and loopholes – of the game as it is written in the rulebooks. If the game is unbalanced, or if the balance is left to a negligent GM, so much the better. This state of affairs just makes it easier for a Rules Lawyer to do his work. Manipulation and triumph through canny interpretation is their goal.

The **Power Gamer** won’t. He wants power, lots of it, and he resents any attempt to prevent his character from being the ‘best of the best of the best’. This type of player will bend, break and stomp on the rules to get an ego boost. He pushes the rules as far as he can, and the cardinal rule is “Don’t get caught”. Of course, the end result is that the Power Gamer also gets to bend, break and stomp on the story and the other players. But that’s why he’s there.

The **Casual Gamer** won’t, either. She is only in this because she is bored, or because nothing else was going on, or because the boyfriend was playing that evening. She doesn’t care about anything game-related at all - not because she is power-hungry, or because she is mean and cruel, but because the chances are pretty good she won’t even BE at the next game session.

The **Team Player** will. He or she is usually (not always) the end result of a long process of steady maturing. This comes only from years of actual play. Not all players mature, of course. And not all of them are old, grizzled veterans of the Friday Night Club. I am talking about a specific mindset here. You know who you are. The selection process is painless - if you don’t fit the description, none of what follows will appeal to you. The rest of this article (and others like it) will be of interest only to the matured Gamer.

High Personal Defenses – or “Your Armor Class is WHAT?!”

One note before I begin. High personal defenses fall under the category of ‘passive abuse’. This does not mean ‘less destabilizing’ – it’s just that passive abuses are harder to detect and deal with. A passive abuse takes longer to do its dirty work, and is usually based on subtle flaws in, or abuse of, the rules. But it is just as corrosive in long-term campaigns as active abuse. In fact, active abuse can be easier to deal with, because, while it is fairly obvious and fast-acting, it is also mostly a result of over-achieving players or a GM who lacks a firm hand.

High Personal Defense, sometimes known as Armor Class, is really the easiest and most obvious way to get a leg up on the game and the other players. It is insidious in nature. It raises no alarms, as it is an established part of the genre. It is usually the first choice of new players, whose survivability is in question from the first roll of the dice. Yet high defenses can slowly corrupt the game with an arms race which neither players or GM can win. And this ‘arms race’ can get out of hand really fast, with severe consequences.

Death Blender

The arms race usually begins when characters, not yet high in terms of power or toughness, acquire high defenses such as plate armor or powerful protective items. Most Game Masters will counter this by steadily increasing either the number of creatures, or the individual power of each creature, for a given encounter. The arms race has begun. The first consequence is that, as time passes, the monsters will get bigger, or they increase in number. Encounters become more challenging, but also more lethal. A typical encounter in a normal game might result in a moderately-armed, leather-clad Second Level character being beaten senseless, and stripped of his belongings by a band of goblins.

When the arms race is well underway, it’s quite common for that same character to be in shiny field plate, wading his way through the horde of minions. And at first, everyone cheers. This fellow is unstoppable! But the players have forgotten that, while the armor is steel plate, the character inside is still made of marshmallow. A well-armored character will usually spend many turns in combat. It is just a matter of time until the fatal blow lands. And when the inevitable Natural Twenty is rolled, our hero will be instantly killed by a single double or triple-damage shot to the kidneys.

If our hero had not been so heavily protected, perhaps he would not have stayed so long in combat, or gone so deep into the catacombs. Vulnerability breeds caution. And perhaps the GM would not have sent so many nasty creatures to swarm him. Overkill does not serve the story. Nor does it help that such a challenge to Our Hero is nearly always quick death for his fellow adventurers, who are probably not so well-equipped.

Surviving a Walk with the Devil

The second consequence is that, when characters are armored to their eyeballs, and the lethality index is high, it is very hard to start over as a new character. High-level characters die, and are replaced by farmhands starting out on the road to adventure. New players arrive, starting new characters and looking forward to an evening of fun in a fantasy setting. No beginning character stands a chance of surviving even a single scenario, when everyone else in the party is a walking engine of destruction.

Bo-ring!

The third consequence is that of the ‘blanding’ of your character. As other game systems have pointed out, your character is dependent on weaknesses and strengths to define his or her place in the campaign world. These character traits determine how they will go about making their way through it. A very high armor class will make your character boring – after all, if you can’t be hit, you may as well be a rock. What can challenge you that is not, itself, a paragon of power? It’s vulnerability that makes a player think, duck, dodge and weave to survive - and in the process, develop a character other people want to know. Fellow players want to know that they are necessary to the party’s success. People need to be needed. Two-legged tanks often don’t need anybody.

That sums up why you should care about the imbalance that High Personal Defenses can bring to your campaign. Assuming you DO care, what can you do about it?

Establish a Tech Level

The arms and armor presented in any game system’s rulebook is a smorgasbord of types which have been culled from three thousand years of armed human conflict. Let’s consider weapons.

Obviously, not every weapon ever invented will make a given list – there is not room enough, and there is often no need. However, for the purposes of a fantasy campaign, the list is long enough. Most fantasy games assume you are at least in the Bronze Age. Stone axes will not be much in demand. However, with a few moment’s thought, you can extend this example, and arrive at the reasonable conclusion that not all weapons enjoyed their heyday during the same time period. For example, Polearms of varying types are available on many lists, despite the fact that they are intended for massed troop formations, and despite the fact that some are actually descendants of others – designs which are, in some cases, hundreds of years apart!

Because the sourcebooks are designed for flexibility, they try to present a wide range of choices in weapons, and these they pluck willy-nilly from thousands of years of examples. However, all these weapons listed on the same page can easily lead to a dangerous error – the idea that they are, somehow, all in use at the same time, in the same campaign world you are playing in. It should be obvious that this is not so, and probably the game’s designers never intended that it should be.

Stepping over to armor, you can see the same mistake being made again. As soon as you see the extensive list of personal protection, the question immediately presents itself: “Why would anyone wear leather armor if chainmail were readily available?” The

obvious answer is: they wouldn't. Oh sure, any number of people will immediately shout "cost, dummy!" However, remember that in most fantasy campaigns, money is rarely an ultimate issue, mostly because it severely cramps the heroic style. Getting by on a few gold a year might be satisfactory for the average NPC, but hardly suits heroes who are busy saving the kingdom.

Actually, the availability of different types of armor is more like comparing a 1923 Model T and a 2004 Mustang. In 2004, people drive the Mustang if they can afford it, and something cheaper – but similar – if they can't. You don't see poor folks driving Model Ts. The level of technology is constant. And that is what you, the Game Master, control.

What tech level does your campaign enjoy? Are you setting the tech level to European Late Middle Ages? Early Roman? Arabia in the 1200s? Go look to see what was the predominant armor type for the chosen era. Be sure to look not only at the style of the moneyed types, but at what the peasants wore, too. Decide, for example, that in your campaign, chainmail is the best a man can get, and that leather and fur are second best. Or if you must, go with plate mail, with the po' folks wearing ring mail or possibly scale mail. The well-equipped man in the field might have a coat of plates, if he is lucky.

Determine Rarity

Think about how many 200-mph sports cars you see on the freeway, and allocate your advanced armor accordingly. A car is a car, and the Bug will get you there, too. But there will be a lot more folks in Volkswagens than in Porches. Rarity is a function of many things – cost, tech level, and the likelihood that you will get your hands on something without having to beat the crap out of its former owner first. Even if you do get your hands on it, there seems to be a rule that the better the armor, the less likely it is to fit you properly when you try to wear it. One glance at the way the better armor types are designed and you will begin to see the sense in this. A character should NOT 'find' a suit of armor that fits him or her perfectly – or even very well. Close is as good as it should get, and even that should be a very small percentage of the time. The lower the tech level, the less of a problem this is, but you should always keep the really good stuff as rare as teeth on a chicken.

Finding a magic item that grants permanent, substantial personal protection should be something that is incredibly rare, if it even exists. Most folks will be wearing it, or it will be locked up, or it will be at the bottom of the ocean. You will not find it in a Dragon's hoard, either, because folks use such items to ensure they get away in one piece – leaving nothing for the Dragon. Or the Dragon himself will wear such protection, if he can.

Determine Cost in Money and Time

Several rulebooks and supplements have already put the lie to the idea that you can just stroll down the Avenue of Armorers in the nearest big city, pony up thousands of gold, and walk out in a shiny suit of field plate. But, of course, this happens all the time in fantasy campaigns. Now, some folks think this is where the 'fantasy' part comes in. The idea is that 'fantasy' means you can do anything you like, indulge in power games,

etc. But the truth is, ‘fantasy’ really implies the fantastic. Dragons, elves and the like are wonderful, amazing things – but only if you have an ordinary, no-nonsense world and background to set them off in. If everything goes, nothing is going to be fantastic. The same applies to hum-drum things like getting armor. The best armor available in your campaign had better be rare, demanding in terms of maintenance, and the product of only the most skilled of the Master Craftsman in that region. A lower-middle class worker is supposed to be able to earn up to ten gold pieces in a year. A good suit of chainmail will cost between 80-120 gold pieces – eight to twelve years’ income for the average schmoe! The very best armor available in your tech level might be field plate. That will cost between 3500-4500 gold pieces, more than ten average men can earn in a lifetime! If the very best armor in your campaign doesn’t follow these proportions, see that it does from now on. If that means plate mail suddenly costs 20,000gp, so be it.

The other factor is time. The more expensive and personalized a given armor is, the longer it will take to make. Assuming a character has the money, and has found a Master Armorer with the time and inclination to do business with him or her, you can expect that character to be out of the adventure for at least four to six game months. That is assuming, of course, that the initial attempt to make that wonderful armor is successful. If it is not, if a mistake was made, then the fitting will take longer. The character has to remain within a day’s ride of the Master Armorer, and submit to weekly fittings as the suit is created for him. But all of these rules are presented much better elsewhere. The point is, a player wishing to upgrade is going to have to sacrifice adventuring time to get what he wants. That is often worth more than gold. Use it to your advantage.

Determine Availability in a Given Area

Experienced Master Armorers are like any other Master – they specialize. You must decide how many are available in your campaign for a given armor type, and then determine if they are available for general hire. This is not as easy as it sounds. Armorers often have all the business they can handle, from the day they join the Guild to the day they die over a hot anvil. There is no shortage of demand for armor of every type in a campaign world which is often at war. Kingdoms left and right are heavily dependent on troops and personal guards and militias, as well as other sorts of weapon-wielding brutes and blackguards. Force of arms is the main source of political power, after all. You can be sure that if a Master Armorer is any good at all in his chosen craft, he will be permanently retained by those in power. His services are theirs, and theirs alone. The chance to commission a serviceable suit of really good armor should be treated as a rare opportunity – the gift from a grateful Duke, perhaps – rather than the equivalent of picking up a loaf of bread from the corner shop.

Advertise Armor Drawbacks

No one sleeps in plate armor, okay? No one walks around town in it, either. The stuff is carried on a horse, with a squire in tow, and donned just before a major battle. Walking around in it, as though it were a tee-shirt and jeans, is ludicrous. It is heavy, hot and at best, uncomfortable. There is no air conditioning and very little peripheral vision and your hearing suffers. Heat exhaustion is a very real enemy.

And metal armor is fussy, demanding stuff. The metal rusts, the joints freeze, the hinges wear through and blow out, the straps rot and tear, and then there is combat damage. You have to track the damage to your armor, repair it when it busts, and suffer poor armor class AND reduced agility AND extra fatigue when you don't.

It takes time to don armor, any armor. This alone can keep a character out of combat if he or she is awakened at night, and is determined to get the whole thing on in a hurry before rushing out of the tent and into battle. Chainmail isn't too bad, but leather is a chore, so is scale mail, and plate is impossible, even with help. The truth is, the characters in your campaign should be dressed in street clothes most of the time, especially at night, unless they are crawling through the local dungeon or standing guard. And they should be paying, in terms of time and money and inconvenience, for every bit of armor they have with more than a few moving parts.

The Key Is Enforcement

All of this advice is worthless unless you make it clear, write it down, get the word out, and make it stick. This is true of every solution to every sort of gaming abuse, passive or active. You, the GameMaster, the StoryTeller, are going to have to decide before anything else happens, whether you are going to own the Story – or whether it is going to own you. The players will not help you here.

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