

FPlus Submission: Games are Serious Business: The Tao of D&D

Alexis Smolensk, the proprietor of The Tao of D&D blog (<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/>), brings the hectoring self-importance of Pitchfork Media to the world of Dungeons and Dragons. Let him tell you about why elfgames are important.

1. Sex and D&D ... the Steamy Edition

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2013/08/sex-and-d-steamy-edition.html>

Discounting an [earlier post](#) I wrote on this subject, there really is no reason why sex cannot be part of a player character's agenda ... despite a general feeling that no one would ever want to take part in sex and gaming unless one were, as [Roger the GS](#) puts it, "goofy horndogs" ... despite, as he also says, the lack of mechanical means.

This continues to astound me, really ... but then matters of sex always do. For such a universal recreation; for something that undeniably offers the best feeling - however brief - that any human has a chance at obtaining, for free; and for something that yields the most rewarding experience and purpose that can conceivably be available, the insertion of life into one's family and care, this culture just baffles the living fuck out of me.

But then, I grew up in the 70s.

No one in the 70s thought that any of this moral crap was going to hold out much longer. Stonewall had happened, public nudity had broken the barrier, the powers that be were unable to hold back not only the spread of porn but the spread of all kinds of porn. The religious right had failed in their effort to stem the tide of swearing and sex in film, or to keep people from making fun of religion (see Life of Brian) and on the whole, generally, the majority was waking up to the fact that sex could be talked about, it could be admitted openly as something a person liked, and all those people who whined about it were clearly impotent and constipated.

Then ... the moral majority coalesced and went to war against the free press and media by targeting advertisers and money. AIDS happened and the public was deluged with misinformation that expressly misrepresented homosexuals ... and terrified heteros in their beds. Governments and especially the feminist right cracked down on kink with laws and invented morality intended to make everything sound like rape. And political correctness was invented.

So here we are. People still like sex. The porn is still everywhere. Homosexuality hasn't been crushed. Television and movies are full of nudity and kink. All the morality proscription failed in the extreme. Rule 34 reigns supreme. But four guys sitting around a table playing D&D can't deal with one of them saying he'd like to have sex with an Elven princess without being labeled a "goofy horndog."

Baffling.

I don't know if its because boys who play D&D are so socially inept with women that homosexuality is a constant, terrifying possibility - being that they cannot get within touching range of anything but boys - or if it is because D&D boys are so noticeably desperate that speaking out loud of the opposite sex brings derision and hatred because, well, *We Do Not Speak Of Them Here*. I've certainly been in some games where boys describing sex with women was a wild free-for-all, going back to our high school days when those things were funny as hell. I have it on good authority that there are some profoundly unpleasant moments at some tables for girls where the sex jokes are constant, blatant and abusive ... and so maybe that's the goofy horndogginess that occurs at Roger's table.

That kind of horndogginess would get you punched in the face at mine. Probably not by me - I'm all the way on the other side of the table. There are some boyfriends and women who would be a lot closer to you, who'd reach you first.

Sex is a part of the human experience. It's a huge part of drama, of purpose, of what makes us go. We identify in large part with the need for, and the results of, sex. This is why there is a lot more sex on the internet than there is D&D.

But it makes a player feel ... uncomfortable. That is the whole argument against. "We were playing the game the other day, and we had gotten into town after a hard battle. The DM said there were some prostitutes by the front gate, just to make us understand what kind of town it was, and Jeremy - he's new - asked how much they cost. We laughed, but he was serious. Oh my god. So the DM told him, and Jeremy said he paid the money and they did it in back of the guardhouse. Jeez, it just made me sick. What a fucking horndog."

And ... yeah.

It's not actually difficult to get into a discussion these days about sex. They happen at work, they happen spontaneously at the bar, they just sort of crop up here and there. Hell, I've had conversations about sex with my parents (after I got to be 40, they just loosened up, no idea why). Of course, there's the whole internet. And what's funny is that there are these vast, open landscapes of people talking openly about sex, and the sex they'd like to have, and when they'd like to have it, or when they did have it ... and none of them are snorting in comical shock when someone says "boob" or "pussy" - like a bunch of cheezy grade sixers.

We all know where these chat rooms are. And we know people go there when they'd like to stop being alone, and maybe meet someone of like mind.

I met my present partner of 12 years through one, back in 2001.

The "uncomfortable" argument is a powerful one. It transcends the table, it reaches out to the whole D&D internet, where Roger and many others sneer in disgust at the idea of a player choosing to step into the shoes of a HUMAN BEING. Yes, by all means, hack things to death. Yes, gloat over gold. Please, here, the door is wide open for any mind fucking game-playing you'd like to do with other players or the DM. Yes, welcome to the land of megalomaniacs, narcissists, gluttons and the pompous. "But we don't do that other thing."

The moody, dangerous Pirate Captain heads down to the beach, bottle of ouzo in hand, mourning the loss of her dead husband, whom the party briefly knew and whom they buried. The player character watches her, well aware of how violent she can be, how deep her feelings - and though she's been described by a male DM, the description is compelling, *just like every description of a strong female character in a book or story written by a man has been since the dawn of time*. And the player would like to do something. He's interested in where events might go if somehow this NPC were induced to be more than just a momentary distraction, but an ally too. But how to approach her. She seems to disdain everyone and everything. But clearly she is filled with passion. What to do?

Like any fighter girdling on a sword and stepping up to a lion, daring to face the thing in its lair, he marches forward and without any weapons at all. He knows she probably carries a dagger. He knows she's murdered men before. But he wants to believe there's more than that. He tells the DM he seizes her by the arm, and turns her around. He's a fighter, he's fifty pounds more than her, and the DM rolls a die. "I tell her to stop being stupid," the player tells the DM. "I tell her she cannot mourn his death forever. She's destroying herself with liquor and this endless sorrow. I shout at her, tell her to be alive now, to recognize that her dead husband would not want her to stay like this."

"She fights you," says the DM, and the player realizes that her hand might in that moment reach for the dagger she has hidden. "I hold on tight." The DM pronounces that the player is successful. The woman doesn't speak, and asks if the player says anything else. The player, daring, says, "I tell her that her husband left her." The DM rolls a die, says the woman breaks free and punches the fighter. He takes a point of damage. "DAMN YOU!" the woman says. The fighter doesn't give in. "He gave you all he had and now he has left you. He's left you here, alone, and you know that there's nothing else he can give you!"

A roll. The DM says the woman stands her ground, furious, trying with all her strength to hold herself together, but clearly she's too overwhelmed to speak.

The fighter says, "I speak to her very gently. I tell her she's not alone. I tell her there are others here who won't leave. Who will fight with you, win with you ... and die WITH you. If you will open your eyes."

She looks at the fighter. The DM announces that she is overwhelmed. He says that the woman lifts a hand, half-heartedly, towards the fighter.

The fighter responds, "I seize the hand. I use it to pull her tight against me. If she makes no protest, I kiss her hard. I make her understand I've meant every word."

The DM says she doesn't fight. She gives in. She yields. The fighter says, "I press her down to the sand. I'm very careful not to push too hard, not to hurry. I want her to understand that this is not sex, this is me caring for her. I want her to understand that I'm willing to be there for her."

The DM judges the moment, chooses 2d6, decides that if it's a 7 or more, then she returns the feeling; if it's a 6 or less, she has merely weakened, but she is still thinking about her husband.

The DM rolls a 9.

"She understands," the DM says.

2. Creativity And Breast-Feeding

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2010/08/creativity-and-breast-feeding.html>

Three weeks ago, [Trollsmyth](#) linked to a Newsweek [article about creativity](#) called 'The Creativity Crisis,' an article pitching the argument that creativity is an inherent quality and that it is something society is in danger of losing. Having established (through typical journalistic bias) *from one source* the existence of a 'creativity score' for individuals, the article naturally sells the fear that "creativity scores are declining," rushing to blame TV and videogames, with the lack of creativity development in schools as the third culprit.

The article at one point bemoans, "All around us are matters of national and international importance that are crying out for creative solutions ..." – then claiming that it takes a 'healthy marketplace' to allow a populace to either be receptive to ideas or contribute.

The whole article is written in typical Newsweek style, punching forward the political agendas that the magazine has become famous for and making sure that **you** keep reading in case some terrible calamity might result when people no longer have ideas!

It's a big steaming pile of hooey, of course ... but Trollsmyth only wants to pull out the small bit about creativity being learnable and I can't fault him for the paragraph he [chose](#).

Putting it more succinctly, my first wife went to high school with a very tall fellow who didn't play basketball, saying he didn't know how ... and the coach told him, "We can teach you how to play basketball - we can't teach you how to be tall."

There are, obviously, millions of ideas in the world, brilliant and otherwise, that won't be

advanced in our lifetimes because they step on someone's toes, or are simply too difficult for a tight-fisted public to implement. Ideas only have value if they can be sold - that's the guts of our world. 'Reception' of an idea in this culture, the one that pays Newsweek's bills, is the willingness of your average stranger to open up his or her wallet and give you twenty bucks.

But seriously, fuck all that. There's an enormous amount of creativity that goes on continuously without money changing hands that doesn't have much to do with the marketplace, and is therefore of no interest to Newsweek. It interests me, however, and I'd like to tackle the question that Trollsmyth quotes.\

Is creativity learnable?

I'd like to advance an unqualified YES. But that's not going to do many of you a lot of good. Because, you see, it isn't *easily* learnable.

Many of you are creatively working on worlds and developing adventures, and so you've learned that creation is hard. Particularly, extended creation. As the progress of your world increases, the number of variables and tasks that suggest themselves starts to seem like an insurmountable list ... leading to a great number who quit. Those who quit simmer unhappily for months in their creative juices until they launch themselves into a new world, a new idea, a new game, hoping that THIS time the process will prove something within their scope of achievement.

I know something about creativity. I'm going to take advantage of the evidence this blog provides to try to make a few points here about how you become more creative, and how you get to be better at it. And since I'm a contentious old bugger, I'm not going to be nice about it. Here's what you do:

Get Your Mouth Off The Tit

If you've been playing this game more than two to three years as a DM, and you are still buying modules and considering playing a new gaming system that's just come out, you have a dependency problem. I think that twenty years ago it was worthwhile looking into new things, since a lot of the stuff that was being created and advanced in the world of RPG was actually *new*. But there is an enormous amount of written material that has been piled up already, and you should have had plenty of time to peruse the lion's share of it in the space of three years (assuming you're serious about the craft - if you're not, what the fuck are you reading me for?).

If this is your twentieth year and you're still checking out the shelf at your gaming store for new games you've never heard of before, there's only one thing I have to say to you: you have a fetish. For the love of the game, RPGs are not like the medical profession. There aren't any mind-boggling changes in the technology that you need to keep abreast of year-by-year. If you're not happy with the combat tables that you have, after three years you ought to be *expert*

enough to *make your own tables*. What in hell is wrong with you? Why are you plonking down another \$25 dollars on another module when by this time you probably have more experience playing the game than the fuckwit designer?

Okay, that's harsh. But at some point its time to take stock of your life and ask yourself why you haven't learned how to draw rooms on a map and fill them with monsters and treasure. You're obviously lacking where it comes to using your brain - it's time to dust the cobwebs off that thing and put it to use.

Yes, true, you probably won't design a dungeon as flashy and nuanced as the really great stuff you can find online ... but that's because you've had your lips firmly suckered to the tit all this time. It's time to pull back and recognize that mother's milk doesn't need to be your favorite food any more. Yes, with the end of the sucking there's going to be a lot of bad designing in your future. But that's only because you should have been practicing, instead of becoming the best tit-hound in your neighborhood.

So, Expect To Be Bad At This ... For Awhile

If you had started creating your own shit at the right time, ie. the same month you were introduced to the game, you'd be way ahead of where you are now. But you didn't, and you're older and you've got regular players now who have been sucking at the tit second-hand. Thus, you will need to beg their forgiveness for your laziness and you will need to inform them that for a little while your world isn't going to be the first-rate puzzle-fest its been for the last however many years. Chances are, some of them are going to raise an eyebrow at you, making flat out statements about your intellect and your abilities - hey, admit it, some of them don't think you're very bright. Why? Well, you've tried playing your own invented adventures in the past and you were really, really bad at it. So bad, in fact, that there's been a tacit agreement among your players to quit your world if you even think about having an original thought again.

You see, they're only in your world because you've proven yourself to be the very best dunder-headed narrator serving as the vocal link between your players and the unseen and aforementioned designer. You've been the convenient moneybag who has schlepped your way to the store every couple of months to plunk down the cash to buy the module to make it possible for your players to live vicariously through your blind acceptance of this routine. They don't give a rat's ass about YOU - anyone reading the module would be satisfactory for them. Chances are, as they slouch out of your kitchen promising never to return until you see some sense and agree to go back to running someone else's modules, they are right now deciding who will be the module-reader that takes your place. If you're very, very lucky (as far as they are concerned), they'll let you sit in on the next Captain Dunsel's world.

If you have a backbone (get yourself tested if you're not sure), you'll wave good-bye to those discourteous assholes and accept that for a year or two you'll be running your children, your wife, your grandmother and possibly your dog in your world. You have just entered the *chrysalis*

stage of dungeon mastering. This is the period when you'll sit and scratch out dungeon after dungeon, before contemplating the possibility of improving the dungeon generation tables in the DMs Guide. This will help train you in the creation of tables, encouraging you to *read a book* or two about caves and caverns, and ultimately about the wilderness when it occurs that you should waste months and months struggling with an outdoor encounter table that might conceivably work. And when you're done with that, you'll find yourself hip deep in the sketching out of a world and its inhabitants and you won't even *care* that you haven't any players.

But nothing is going to work for awhile. Face it, you haven't done much of this creativity stuff and every attempt you're going to make will fall far, far short of even Jerry Bruckheimer's limited imagination. But I encourage you to stay with it, to improve and expand your world, at least until you get to the point where working on the actual world is something you'd do even if you never had any players again.

That doesn't always happen. A lot of would-be independent-minded DMs return to the tit, begging forgiveness from their players and returning to the same hopeless state of mind they're utterly trapped by. A particular few will raise that state of mind to the Nth degree, as though it is some kind of virtue to speak upon or write scads of drudged up verbiage about someone else's achievements. I understand there's even a measure of respect or humble worship to be gained by such coattail-riding. I can't speak to that myself. I haven't got any experience with tit-sucking. I was bottle-fed as a baby.

Creativity is a trait that is learned from *practice*. If you won't practice - and that being if you won't do the work - you won't get better at it.

But if you do stay with it, the day will come when one of your old players, or one of the new ones you've gained, will say to you, "You have a great world!" And from this you will realize, at last, that they are talking about the world you **made**, and not the world you bought from Sal's bargain-bin on 18th Ave and Cheap Street.

3. YMMV

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2014/01/ymmv.html>

I hate this term. If we could invent a tag for the recognition of stupid people, we couldn't do better than this.

First off, it's a troll term. Trolls use it. On the surface it is supposed to mean, "We have different experiences, so we're likely to have different opinions." *Under the surface*, however, it says, "Fuck your experience. I have MINE."

Secondly, it's a shyster's term. It was invented in the 1970s, during the oil crisis, when drivers suddenly got really interested in cars that could get a lot of mileage to the gallon, so much so that it became a deal breaker on buying a car. Because manufacturers wanted to still sell the cars they'd already built and designed, they wanted to make claims about mileage that were basically untrue ... but so they wouldn't get sued, they slapped 'your mileage may vary' after the ad's claim. Some lawyer dreamed up the argument that not every car that came off the line was guaranteed to be exactly like every other car, so sorry, poor you, you got the random dodge that still did 8 miles to the gallon, instead of the 16 mpg we advertised. Tough shit.

So, basically, it evolved as a term that meant, "We may actually be bullshitting you, but we'd like to pretend that what we're saying is true." That's just perfect for the typical troll out for a day on the net, who is more than ready to bullshit and back that shit up with a lawyer's trick. Well done you, fuckwit.

There is something really profound in cognitive dissonance, that I think explains a lot of human history. Historians, in case you haven't met many of them, are absolutely Monday morning quarterbacks. They are more than ready to tell you how Hitler would have won the campaign in Russia, or all the mistakes that Napoleon made, or why the Catholic Church really didn't slap Galileo around the Vatican and make him like it (he and the Pope were friends, don't you know). Feminist Historians in particular are spectacular in this regard - none of the bad women in history ever did anything bad, and all of the moderately talented women in history were talented beyond all reason, it was just a sexist thing that kept them down. If there hadn't been any sexism in the world, George Sand wouldn't have been named George, and her books would be hailed as the greatest literature humankind has yet to produce.

Overall, there's a complete failure to account for human behavior in these things. The quarterback didn't make the brilliant pass because the quarterback had one hell of a lot of shit going on at the time and didn't see the pass. The tendency is to think the quarterback saw the pass, and *decided* not to throw it that way. As though every action we take, all day long, is a *decision* we consciously make - ahead of taking that action, of course! There's no dissonance here. There's no resolute will to unconsciousness in our behaviour that amounts to automatic pilot. No, that never happens.

It is like the same trolls who say, 'IMO' or 'IMHO' ... yes, jackwit, we know it's your opinion. You've just said "I don't think ..." Then, somehow, as if to pull another shyster trick, you've dropped the IMO bomb, this time saying, "I know I've completely ignored everything you've said, but we're all egalitarian here, so don't judge me." There's that dissonance again. "I want to say what I believe, but I don't want to be judged for it."

Tough shit. You are judged for it. I'll be honest here and say that I'm judging you. I think you're a fucking idiot. I think you lack the faith you ought to have in your convictions. I think you're weak. I think you're incapable of producing a meaningful argument. I think you're living in a bubble of self-love that deludes you. I don't think you matter.

Let me let you into a little secret. No one else does, either. And that hurts, doesn't it? It hurts to know that people think all the things I'm thinking, *they just won't say it out loud*. They don't take you seriously, either. And because they don't take you seriously, they won't hire you. Or give you a promotion. Or care if you can pay your rent. They won't care if they hurt you. They won't care, because you don't matter.

That's mean. But shit, brother, I got all kinds of people who are going way out of their way to hurt me. They're trying really, really hard. They're spending far more energy on trying to hurt me than they're spending on making their blogs worth reading, or improving their lives.

If you want this game to be respected, the game has to be serious. If the game is ever going to be good, it has to be serious. Does the game **need** to be serious? Well, no. Of course not. But that doesn't matter. No game needs to be serious. They evolve that way because the people playing those games WANT the games to be serious. Over time, those wanting it to be serious, who are themselves serious, play the game longer, harder and more meaningfully than those who consider it a joke or a lark. Eventually, the people who take it seriously become the center of the community, and those who think it a lark are pushed more and more to the outside of the circle. Because those people, the frivolous people, DON'T MATTER. They have no effect on anything. They're there, but they're just bodies sucking air. Evolution simply erases them from the equation. Time passes, and those people get bored with all the seriousness, and they *go away*.

Whereas the serious people keep playing. And playing. And playing.

There is no variance in the mileage here. We're driving, and we're getting plenty of distance for the fuel we're using. Whereas the trolls, tourists and losers are in the passenger seat, whining about when we're going to get there. Like children. Who don't know what the hell is going on, because they're children.

Just shut the fuck up. We'll get there when we get there.

4. The Day is Coming

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2014/01/the-day-is-coming.html>

I want some room to answer this comment from the last post, from [Andrej](#). Andrej plays in my [online campaign](#):

"Yet people can get together and play chess or cards intently and people can get together to rehearse and act out a play or musical performance together intently. What is it about RPG's,

that enjoy some aspects the above those stated activities, that makes it harder. Do even the better run games just accept that RPG's are less serious stuff? Is it something else?"

People who play chess and bridge do so for the pure tactical elements of the game. Chess players, in my experience, tend to be anti-social in general when they're not playing, and the game does not demand they be social. Bridge players, on the other hand, tend to be VERY social when they're not playing ... social to the point where they don't need to bond and interact and be friendly because much of the rest of their lives consists of that; bridge is a rest away from chatter.

Actors performing in a play rehearse seriously because they know the day is coming that they will have to stand in front of strangers and be judged. When someone at a rehearsal is less than serious, who clowns around too much, the director is there to stomp them, and the other actors will tacitly support the director out of the fear they have that come opening night, they'll look like idiots. If you go to an opening night and the play is bad, it is usually because a) the actors were not serious; or b) the director wasn't willing to stomp hard. A fellow I knew back in the 90s, who directed several plays and a couple of films, ultimately realized that he had to be willing to throw people off the set or out of the performance *for nothing more than not showing up to rehearsal*. He had tried to be understanding for years, and it just meant that the serious people couldn't rehearse because the non-serious people weren't there. Answer? Fire all non-serious people. No matter how much they cry, how much they whine, what excuses they have, etc. By the time I'd attended my last experience with this director, 12 years after his first getting his feet wet, his speech included the statement, "If your mother dies, and you are giving the Eulogy at her funeral, and you don't tell them to reschedule the funeral because it conflicts with this rehearsal, you will not be in this play. If you are less than dead, and you do not wheel yourself in your wheelchair to a rehearsal, you will not be in this play. Get a friend to pick you up, get a gurney, do your fucking lines laying on your back staring at the ceiling - if you're not willing to do that, you will not be in this play."

These are the standards to which I conformed when I used to perform. These are the standards that all good performance companies meet. Just talk to a couple of ballet artists about the damage they do to their feet.

RPGers do not submit to this type of treatment, or these standards, because they DO NOT CARE THIS MUCH. It is that simple. The chess players I have known, and I have known many because I used to moonlight at a coffeehouse/bookstore that at the time was the center for chess in a city of a million people, live for the game. They work at their jobs so that they can feed themselves and have a home so they won't be interrupted in their desire to play. They will play with you, but they don't give a shit who you are, how much money you have, what you do for a living, if you're married, if you're educated, if you have children or if you're psychopathic. They definitely won't give a shit about you if you CAN'T PLAY. If you prove you can play, if you can make them sweat before they beat you, if you are good enough that you can win half the

time, they will pronounce you a worthy human being who has the right to share their air. Everyone else is shit.

Bridge players are friendlier. They'll chat about the hands, they'll give advice, they'll make a comment or two about the outside world while they're shifting their hands, and often the dummy will mutter on about a story, usually to the player on the bidder's right. But there is some terrifically subtle etiquette in it all and if you underbid or overbid too frequently, if you get a reputation for it, players will speak of you snottily behind your back, rating you on the same level as homeless persons or wifebeaters. You may be allowed to play, but it will become quite clear that you will not be wanted, and this is a decision that will be remembered all the rest of their life and all the rest of your life. It won't be, "Nice enough, but she can't play." It will be, "Oh my god, don't mention her."

Why? Because these players don't care about *people*. They may give lip service to it, but at the core they are haughty, superior, judgemental and unforgiving ... and they care FAR, FAR more about the game than they do about people.

But then, both games, bridge and chess, have absolutes. There is an absolute win. There is an absolute lose. This makes it far easier to establish one's credentials, or to be rated, on ability. RPG's don't have anything as clear-cut as that.

Too, they've both had time, literally centuries, to establish social parameters about play. Both games can be played for money, but usually aren't, unlike poker or other assorted games that are tainted by the presence of people who either have problems with money or who ultimately are willing to cheat for money. People cheat at bridge or chess, but they do it for *prestige* ... and both games are hard to cheat at. Chess, because the good players never take their eyes off the board, and bridge, because it takes real wit to invent hands that no one has ever seen before. And bridge players remember hands. They remember hands from 15, 20 years ago. They can play them out for you, if you ask. Creating hand after hand from scratch, so you can look brilliant as a bridge player, would take more brains than it would to just get a lot better at playing bridge.

These centuries of development have included adapting new players to the standards the old players use. It means generation after generation of older players harumphing and clucking their tongues at young players who behave inappropriately, or hissing and even physically threatening people who won't shut up - with the full support of everyone in attendance, I might add.

Try to imagine a D&D game where the players acted like the tough chessplayers who meet at the park in downtown Manhattan everyday - who are not above putting a knife between your ribs for kibbitzing. Imagine a D&D player turning to another one and saying, "What the fuck do you mean you burn the barn down? Get your shit and get the fuck out. Do it now, or I swear to god you're doing it with a broken leg."

Imagine being at a convention and some guy passing by the table says, "You guys playing D&D, or what?" and your friend Joe standing up, looking at the stranger and saying, "Yeah. That's right. And we don't need motherfuckers like you opening your mouth and wrecking our veri-fucking-similitude. So why don't you take your pussy ass fifteen feet back and shut the fuck up."

Those days are coming. They're a couple of generations in the future, but they are coming. I think it's kind of funny-strange that people haven't yet grasped that all this back and forth about how serious the game is reflects the growing mood that for the game to be taken seriously, the players are going to have to get serious. We're a long way from that. There are still a lot of losers around who don't actually give a shit about role-playing, who are just tourists, just fuckers who are here to troll, not here to roll, who are taking advantage of the fact that the people who actually give a damn are still uncertain about what's allowed, what's expected or what we're allowed to say. But that ain't gonna be forever. Players in large numbers are going to get clear about what makes a good game, and what doesn't, and how the makers of the game have to bow out and shut the fuck up, just like any other kibbitzer.

The older players, the ones doing this for fifty, sixty years, won't need to "catch up" during games, because there's nothing left to catch up on. That's what age is like. They're gonna play very hard core games, and the young people 20 years from now are gonna see that in vids online and they're going to think, "SHIT, I want to play like that." And they're gonna turn to their buddies and say, "Hey, shut up, we're trying to get some role-playing done here."

Yeah. The day is coming. People just can't see it yet.

5. Evolution and Engagement

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2014/01/evolution-and-engagement.html>

[Yarivandel](#) wrote an excellent comment on [this post](#), with regards to the poor display of 'roleplaying' I had posted (the video can be seen by following the link). I'm going to cut Yarivandel's comment, just to get to the meat of it. Please go see the full comment, posted today, on the other post:

"... this video should never see the light of day. If I was to point out every single thing that is wrong with it I would probably write a novel. But they surely managed to achieve one thing, show rpg with no role playing whatsoever. Just one long coarse joke ... It's as honest and natural as an official expression of personal thanks on a corporate meeting."

It's a good excuse to talk about the influence of corporatism, and the pattern that has gripped the role-playing world since D&D broke out of its underground prison around 1980.

Some would disagree, but I feel that break-out did not begin in a good way. The first media content I can recall, the first mention of D&D that did not begin with the small, word-of-mouth group I knew, would be the news stories that started poking up here and there about teenagers killing themselves because their characters died. There was a fellow in Ontario that was supposed to have done it, and I think another in California. There have been such stories intermittently throughout the years.

Too, there was a story going around that three fellows stole a lion from the Boston Zoo and released it in the catacombs under Boston University. Gawd only knows if there are such catacombs, or if it happened in Boston, or even at all, but the story was told. Supposedly, they let the lion go, then girded themselves with swords and make-shift armor with the intent on killing the thing. Who knows, it might have inspired LARPing. The story also said that two were injured seriously, that one was killed, and that the lion was ultimately fine and returned to the zoo. If memory serves me, the first time I heard that story, it was told to the class by my Grade 12 Social Studies teacher.

By the time that horrorshow [Mazes and Monsters](#) came out, the stories about people going crazy and kids whacking off each other and themselves were thick and detailed, MUCH more so in 1982 than they are now. It may be hard to believe, but the world actually WAS more ignorant and sympathetic to media stupidity than it is now. Today, it's the media that's ignorant; back then, impossible as it may seem, it was the audience. The internet has made an impact.

This has been a long trip around the barn, but my point is that the 'message' about the game was screwed blue and tattooed right from the beginning. That's what happens when the people who actually know anything (and I have argued against ANYONE in 1980 actually knowing anything) are short any sort of budget for promotion, or blessed with any charisma or talent with regards to PR. People tell me Gygax had charisma. Here's a small bit of Gygax displaying the elocution and energetic skills role-playing could rely upon at its outset:

That is, perhaps, unfair. We were all SO impressed by his showing on 60 Minutes, weren't we?

'Corporate' D&D is the only sort of voice the game has ever had. The Media Corporation first, that sought to burn the game to the ground in favor of getting ratings from soccer moms and bacon-bringing Dads who were confused that their 17-year-old children wanted to use the kitchen on Friday nights for rolling dice, rather than scrounging the outside world for booze and drugs, like NORMAL children - and then the Gaming Corporation, that had to spend the first five years of its public relations convincing the world that RPG's are NOT about worshipping Satan, they're NOT dangerous, and that they're **absolutely safe for children**. These days, I wonder if *anyone* remembers that there used to be a significant effort to prove that roleplaying was not a dangerous teenager-fueled death-seeking activity.

The fall-out from that effort has been, of course, that RPGs have definitely become games for children. Large, flatulent, hygiene-deficient children who nevertheless occasionally have some talent doing something for a living that can be done in filthy clothes while smarmily bitching loudly on the internet about how hard it is for them to have any fun.

I rush to shout, however, that this child-adult group is a very TINY proportion of the RPG-gaming community. Which, however, doesn't keep this fetish-driven minority from [pouring money](#) into the coffers of WOTC, then using their habit to demonstrate that they *are infinitely more serious about the game than you ever can be*.

To get all this crap, that they can collect in plastic wrappers and office crates in massive, meaningless piles, this same minority flocks to the conventions where the crap is available. This process proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the success of any company comes from selling as many 32-page mash ups of previously created materials that can possibly be manufactured by a small, dedicated number of vaguely informed corporate employees. Since the uniqueness of the content can be dismissed, what is important is that each fetish item look as kewl and magical as can be rendered with all the resources of modern publishing.

But hey, heck, I'd be happy to sell my book at these conventions too, wouldn't I? An asshole's money will support my lifestyle as well as anyone else's. Thankfully, for both me and WOTC, assholes ALWAYS have money. That is mostly because they are either taking it from someone else, or not spending it on the sort of thing everyone else does, like *friends* for instance.

Chris Perkins is, therefore, merely servicing WOTC's porn audience, the same sort of fuckwits that will fill your table if you're stupid enough to go down to a convention with the expectation of running something. Unless, of course, you're reading this and you ARE one of the fuckwits. Then you think everything I've written to this point is grossly unfair and unreasonable. You're not an asshole. You just want to have fun, that's all. What's wrong with having fun?

Well, as I've written before, 'fun' is a child's concern. Fun parks are built for children. Whining about not having fun is a child's complaint. One thing we can pretty much be certain of when speaking to people we don't know, is that the talking head in the room that uses the word 'fun' to describe what they want to do next weekend is probably the guy who still gets blasted Saturday Night, spills their drink all over a girl in an effort to produce an excuse that will let him drag her to his apartment and half-rape her, only to drop her in a cab, go to bed and wake up the next morning without any memory of it. In the REAL world, the world where filthy clothes are viewed with considerable distaste, the word 'fun' is only used by office managers who are clearly bent on making you work some shit charity detail this weekend instead of being free to rebuild your kitchen cabinets.

There is something evil and sick and endlessly perverse in this overweening infantilistic squalling about fun - that I think we can safely rest at the corporate doorstep. I believe that one of the things we must do, if we are EVER going to free ourselves and develop the game, is

admit that we'd rather be engaged than amused, and do so without feeling shame. It is, after all, children who don't 'get it' ... just as my daughter did not understand at the age of four why I had to go to work every day. At four, she called it 'stupid.' Well of course. She was goddamned FOUR.

When someone refers to your serious, meaningful, difficult, hard-driving game as 'stupid,' just look at them and think, "Four."

It will help enormously.

6. The Distraction

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2013/12/the-distraction.html>

The embedded youtube video below is from the year 2000, featuring a Malcolm Gladwell who is less sure of himself, pitching his first best-seller, *The Tipping Point*. I don't expect the reader to watch all of it, though it is worth watching, particularly to see Gladwell gain his confidence so that he speaks like he always does now. It should be clear to the readers of this blog that I very much like Gladwell, though I often disagree. It is only because he sweeps away so many insisted-upon myths, while bringing to light institutional ideas that have been overlooked.

The relevant passage in the video begins at 13:00.

Gladwell talks about how children were sat down to watch *Sesame Street* prior to that show's launch, with two televisions in the room. The first had the proposed show concept that the creators wanted, while the other had content that was silent, but compelling. Then the creators watched children to learn when they were watching *Sesame Street* (that show being better) and when they were bored, their attention wandering. It's all very interesting. Gladwell then goes on to discuss how Big Bird was necessary to make the show work, and how the mixture of reality and fantasy proved to be a useful tool for enticing children into learning.

As it happens, I was 5 years old when *Sesame Street* began broadcasting. I'm of that peculiar age where I remember Mr. Hooper; I was 18 when Mr. Hooper died, so far too old for the show, but young enough to retain the nostalgia for the show, and be affected by it. One could say I was in the range of the target audience ... and since I am not conscious of any time before the show existed, I must have watched it from the beginning. On some level, my brain was affected by the very things Gladwell talks about that were done by the creators of the show. My understanding of person-to-person interaction, right along with speaking with puppets as though they were real, were established. *Sesame Street* has much to do with how I perceive 'playing pretend' - and in hindsight, understanding why the muppets interacting with humans didn't just

work for children, it worked for adults, too. All through the 70s, Kermit and friends appeared on Carol Burnett and with Julie Andrews, and every other major television variety show that existed. The Muppet Show wasn't just a kid's show, it could be dark and full of black humour, which was even more true of the short lived rebirth that came along in the late 90s.

So when I think about **role-playing**, I have ideals.

Just about every example I see of "role-playing" on youtube, particularly that filmed at various conventions, I can only describe as absolute fucking swill. I really mean that.

And the poster boy for this shit is Chris fucking Perkins. Just look at this below. Take your time, wade through as much as you can choke down, and then we'll keep going.

There's are things that really bother me through the whole video. Perkins himself, for one, having this smug, self-satisfied grin that remains plastered to his face. It's not a friendly grin. It's not a man having a good time. It's a DM thinking to himself, "I AM THE SHIT. Be grateful I let you play." Just stop the video at any point, pause it, and stare at that face for thirty, forty seconds. Then ask yourself, do you like this person?

I don't know. There's an attitude that's here, that I see everywhere. Some player makes a PRETENSE of role-playing. They don't actually roleplay, because they don't actually believe what they're saying - the words are coming out, the shouting, the expressions ... but their faces and expressions always say, "Look at me! I'm so brilliant for making this grunting sound like a fighter!" And then everyone else at the table half-grins and half-laughs, with this nervous, pathetic look that has a mix of "jeez, what a fucking moron he's being" and "I wish I had thought to say that."

These people aren't playing characters ... they're playing this sordid, fucked up game of one-upmanship. And its particularly WEIRD when one of them tries for something really big, recognizes halfway through that they're being a complete, ridiculous idiot, so they break up in a gale of nervous "please don't look at me that was really silly" giggle/whining splat that is always followed by everyone else at the table laughing and the player looking like, "shut up, I was only roleplaying" while still trying to look like it was all in fun.

Pathetic.

These are really, really pathetic-looking people. One says he wants his character to be holding the hand of the elf maiden and woah, does he sound pathetic. One is throwing a die while the audience chants "GO ROD GO ROD!" like he's running for the goal line, and it looks and sounds so ... gawdawful pathetic. And through it all Perkins, described in the comments as

"awesome" and "a blast to play under" never, ever, gets rid of his ridiculous toothy expression that just screams for, I don't know, a fist through it.

I have been playing and writing about this game obsessively for 34 years, and I'd rather be in a Pakistani prison hole than to be forced to play at this table with these fucks.

At least with the hole, when I escaped that traumatic experience people would have a legitimate reason to feel sorry for me. Sitting willingly at this table would be ... signing up for the Olympic "I am a pathetic pissant" team.

Yes, yes, yes, I know that people regularly view D&D Players as sort of pathetic from the outside, but really, can't you just look at these people through the eyes of a normal person and see that there is really something wrong here?

I just wrote about muppets. The actors who had to act with muppets could see the muppeteer, they could see all the mechanical jazz and weird stage-setting that was necessary to make the muppets look 'real,' and they had to act without grinning stupidly or expressing with their face, "I'm acting with a sock puppet." EVEN IF THEY HAD THAT THOUGHT. Because actual roleplaying means sucking it up and actually fucking pretending to find nothing odd about this!

That is because, the habits of grinning, chortling, making side jokes, breaking up in the middle of one's sentence, etcetera, DISTRACT from the actual value of the proceeding. It makes the process something other than a game. It makes the process about personal bad habits, personal weaknesses in the ability to dispense humour, personal failings as a competent human being, culminating in the lack of actual personal charisma. It ceases to be a GAME so much as it becomes seven monkeys flinging poo in a cage.

It makes the game a really crappy childrens show, where what's showing on the other television is better. I'm sorry that these people in these videos, and indeed many of the readers who have gotten this far, don't recognize this.

Perhaps a lot of the reason that roleplaying isn't taken seriously by 99% of the world is because even those people who PRETEND TO DO IT don't take it seriously! Maybe its because the DM running the game and the players playing the game sound like dumb infant morons with a disturbing dice-fetish.

I don't really like role-playing. I don't like it because it makes people nervous and uncomfortable, and people who are nervous and uncomfortable don't enjoy the game. They would rather PLAY than role-play. Most of the participants in my game have come from the sort of shitty one-upsmanship games depicted in the video (and most every video everywhere online), and they'd rather not participate. They're not much up for the sort of dull, plodding role-playing that you see people playing, that goes like this:

"Uh, friend Elfen, uh, Lady, do you, um, perhaps have a spell that would take away the hit points - uh, that is, the health - of yon ... er, yonder ... no, that's yon enemies." "Yonder," corrects someone else. "Right, okay, thanks, yonder enemies." "I think it's actually yon," says the DM. "Well, whatever, the enemies over there."

I'm just going to go over here and ... bang my head a moment.

These are not things I think any advice or education can help. It's quite clear from the Perkins video above that these are all boys who have successfully overcome the attempts of previously encountered institutions to either educate or enlighten them. The only thing we could hope to improve about their existence would be to STOP SHOWING IT ON FILM.

That is, unfortunately, too much to hope for.

7. Favorite Food

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2013/12/favorite-food.html>

Harkening back to [this post](#), and [this post](#) as well, my equipment list has a great many things on it that are not, shall we say, 'useful' - like roast rabbit, brandy wine, shark fin soup, dried prunes, licorice root, dried coconut, etc. The sort of thing one might like to find by the ton for treasure, but not really something the players are motivated to buy. Although, for those heavy into the role-play thing, they will order a turtle soup or buy melons instead of oranges at the town market (not shown in links).

But I had a little idea tonight that I thought I'd bounce around ... if only so I don't talk about my book again.

The [character background generator](#) could be put to good use here.

Suppose we had it generate some 'favorite foods' for new characters, in addition to 'hated foods' ... the sort of things the characters would really hate to eat. Is this the sort of thing that one is allowed to pregenerate? Is it not, after all, sort of beyond our control why we like or dislike a particular thing? Isn't that physical ... and on the level of no one really knows why? I think it very well could be.

There could be three levels of food generation - rare things really liked, common things really liked, general things really hated. Then, if the player eats that rare thing (and the key is, in my world, can the character FIND it?) the character gains, say, a hit point for that day. If the character eats common, liked food, the character gets a +1 constitution check. If the character eats really hated food (presumably because they have to, there's no other food or they do not

wish to be rude), the character is potentially unwell (-1 strength, -2 constitution) for 8 to 16 hours?

Well, some combination of minor benefits and penalties. There's room to play around with it, try different things, see if it motivates people to get interested if there's almonds or pistachios or opium for sale in this particular town. Causing them to grumble if it's been a long, long time since they could find that one thing they really, really like.

I think it could produce some interesting emotional game play. Ideas?

8. Why Don't It Look Like Fun?

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2013/12/fuck-this-rose-shit.html>

I must apologize for not writing more clearly. Yes, [with my last post](#), what I meant was that the DM's fun should take a backseat to the player's.

Over and over, we keep coming back to this word 'fun' and what it means ... which, Christ-for-crackers, I'm not writing another post about. But I would like to get my licks in on this whole conception that during the game everyone's having a gleeful bouncy Chuckie Cheeze fucking fun fest. It's idiotic. In the first place, it's plainly the opinion of people who are *remembering* the last moment of playing with a soft focus lens smeared with vaseline, like a grammie remembering the last time her knickers got wet, and in the second place, where the fuck is all this happy-happy chim-chipperio when the game is actually going on?

Last week I was in a whole room full of people, playing at seven tables, about 40 people in all, with either bland, confused looks on their faces or pissed-off glares of determination and bloodmindedness. If there is a moment of humour, it is always some cold, cackling pleasure at someone's misfortune or humiliation, preferably another player's, or the sour rehash of some fucking Star Wars quote. "These are not the silver swords you're looking for" was the bastardization used this past Wednesday.

Fucking hilarious.

It must seem very ridiculous to these people, having such a gobsmacking good time as they pitch bad rolling dice at the table and swear, or look insulted and miserable because they're characters have dipped into the negatives, that my image of "FUN" is a little girl going around the merry-go-round actually smiling and looking, well, PLEASED. I haven't seen a roleplayer looked pleased since ever. They're either smugly triumphant or sordidly humping the air like an Californian prat on the fucking Tunisian tour of Star Wars film locations. BOO-YAH, motherfuckers!

The only association I make between a typical roleplayer and 'fun' is the three-days-later petulant snarl they produce on the bulletin boards when they screech about someone else daring to suggest the game isn't the best freaking thrill ride since the thigh-shoot at Mother's House. Taking them at their word, the game must be a really great time ... it's a pity it couldn't show on their faces.

For me, I'm damn busy running a game, I haven't got time for 'fun.' The emotional state I most identify with is *frenzied* ... and occasionally, wallowing in the crapulence of "What the fuck do I do now?" This latter seems to come up mostly when the party takes ten minutes to blast through an encounter I expected to take the next four hours. Luckily for me, there are ways to get the party arguing about something meaningless and time-wasting while I throw fuel on the fire of my brain, to think of something before the party has time to notice I'm blank.

But then, parties are having so much damn fun they rarely do.

When do we get to talk about how the game is a serious game, that it is taken seriously by the players while the game is going on, that it is reacted to with serious emotions that cause serious disagreements and serious resentment between players? When do we admit the fucking game isn't kindergarten, or at least admit that if there was no kindergarten teacher we would have spend our fifth year of life gouging out the eyes of our childhood peers like bloodthirsty animals?

See, to talk about this game, I'm really going to need some of the rose-coloured paint scoured off every damn element and object ... even if that means the nostalgia nocturne needs a good push into the river, where it can drown a malignant, freezing, unpitied death.

9. Preface to Smolensk's upcoming book

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2013/12/the-first-day-of-november-and-news.html>

Dungeons and Dragons is an unfortunately named game created by various persons in the 1970s, who failed to realize that the game would evolve so that neither dungeons nor dragons would matter in game play. The game was intended to incorporate a 'fantasy medieval setting,' similar to that of traditional European fairy tales, but in fact the game setting is unrestricted with regards to what time, place or social condition it wishes to reflect. D&D is described as a 'role-playing game'—which meant that a player took action through a 'character,' limited by the statistics of that character. However, players are in no way actually required to assume a 'role' in order to play.

It is an odd game.

I did not write this book in order to address any of these contradictions. Every activity develops its host of idiosyncrasies, which the participants eventually adopt as normal. There's little merit in dissecting them. Honestly, they add flavour. Rather than argue the vocabulary, then, I intend to embrace it, however incomprehensible this may make the book to those who have little or no experience with D&D, or any role-playing game.

This book is not written for the uninitiated, curious bystander. There are more than enough books and materials on the market to introduce people to role-playing ... but there are none I have encountered that presume the reader already knows about dice, characters, spells, monsters and so on. This book does. The gentle reader, then, shouldn't expect to find an explanation of the 'adventure,' or what is meant by 'running the game.' There's no glossary of terms to be found at the back of the book. No time is taken to explain the origins of game rules or how they came to be. This book should be taken as an advanced guide for those who have run the game, or have had the game run for them, and know the difference.

I'm afraid that this book may disappoint some. I have written what follows expressly for the DM, and not the players. A player will no doubt gain something from the reading, but there's no content included that will tell a player how to be a better role-player, or succeed in a campaign. Those things are left to another book.

It is well understood that role-playing games are difficult, tricky things to manage. That explains why there are so few game-masters ... and fewer still who run the game well. Most DMs are wallowing; they understand the rules of the game; they understand practicably what they're supposed to present; but they haven't the skills or the experience to do the job well. They have a surfeit of materials on the market to help them with the game's mechanics—but little that explains the game's presentation, or how the setting is made. Every game master is given nothing more than the observation of their peers and a few scant paragraphs here and there among scattered rule books. It is hoped that trial and error will win out.

I expect to have offered something better.

This is not a rulebook. This book does not contain rules. It does not discuss systems for combat, or for spell use, nor does it offer any templates for characters or skill sets. This book has not been written to offer any arguments about the amount of authority or control a DM has in a game, or how much agency a player has; there is no diatribe contained herein about the evils of railroading. The contents of this book are not bound by whatever edition or game system the reader happens to play, or whether you are Old School or New School. The mish-mash of house rules you may possess, or your strict adherence to the rules of the game you play, is a matter of indifference. Indeed, it should be found that all the methodologies described herein will apply reasonably well to any sort of role-playing ... from fantasy and steam punk to space, from vampires and old evils to superheroes, from roll-playing to diceless games. That is because this book means to explain how the game is presented and managed, and how the setting is made ... regardless of what sort of game or setting.

The improvement of the game is not in the game; it is in the mastery of it.

Make no mistake. The position of this book believes is that to master the game, you must work. You will be asked to strain your imagination; you will be directed to write and advance ideas to your players, and to defend those ideas. You will be shown the bare bones of how to structurally design a

unique and meaningful setting for your world ... not with a set of checklists for what a world ought to contain, but with a comprehensive discussion of what purpose a setting serves, and how it works as a tool in your campaign.

This book asks the reader to reconsider what 'running' is. It challenges preconceptions about what makes a player act as they do, and what players want. It offers insight into your own motivations, your weaknesses and your frustrations as a DM ... and offers strategies that will enable you to compensate.

Most of all, you are invited to change your mind. For an idea to grow, the hard, packed earth must be furrowed. The soil must be shaped to allow the seeds a place, and there needs be time and care for them to germinate. It will be easy to dismiss much of what is written in these pages. Many of the items will seem frivolous, unnecessary or enigmatic ... but rest assured, the adoption of the policies and ideas contained herein will make the reader a better DM. The mere consideration of those elements will do as much.

I do not wish only to inform you; I wish to enable you. I wish to end your irritation at yourself, the rules and the players, to give you a sense that there is a means by which this game can be run effectively and enjoyably. I hope this book provides you with a deep and profound understanding—and that once you've obtained that, others will view you as a significant representative of your craft.

- Alexis Smolensk, DM

10. The Pretense of Simplicity

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2013/10/pretense.html>

Criticism is not persecution.

The western culture has a tendency to treat everything that disagrees with individual taste as a 'persecution' of that taste - as if an argument, "X is bad" is obviously equal to "Everyone who does X is a reprehensible criminal who should be shot and killed at sunrise." This is a very Western attitude. It spawns from the cultural bias of several cultures that arose in the 15th and 16th centuries who were being persecuted, who then took every resistance to their extreme. It has also proven to be a great way to spin media, as people in this culture are more afraid of words than ideas ... and a word like 'persecuted' is a beauty. It conjures such lovely, abusive images, such templates of vile hatred and irrational, cold destruction, that it serves to sober an otherwise narcoleptic reader, causing them to sit up and take notice.

But persecution is not criticism.

Persecution is a systematic mistreatment of a specific individual or group, based upon the infliction of suffering, harassment, isolation and imprisonment. It is the spreading of fear for the purpose of imposing one's own will upon all those who listen. Persecution is produced by fear mixed with a desire for power.

Criticism is a corrective exercise. It is an effort not merely to find fault, but to suggest room for improvement, with the expectation that persons will accept and understand that growth and re-invention are key.

Often, criticism will seem abusive. Yesterday, on this blog, I wrote a post that was as creatively vindictive as I could manage. I wrote that playing the Red Box set was equivalent to playing a children's game. I presented that point with derision and mocking. I did so in order to juxtapose my perception of the Red Box set with the praise for same, in order to instigate a dialogue. I have no intention to systematically abuse those who play the Red Box set, nor to inflict further harassment, nor to spread any fear about playing with that system.

I do wish to wake people up as to what's possible. I do wish to compel the gentle readers of this blog to recognize that the adoption of a simplistic version of D&D will do nothing to advance your value nor your potential as a DM. This blog exists in order to spread knowledge, ideas and a philosophy of D&D. The Red Box set is anathema to that philosophy.

I read quite often that the more complicated versions of D&D - including 2.0, 3.0/3.5 and 4.0 - are difficult, confusing, labyrinthine and counteractive to ease of play. Yes, they are difficult. Yes, initially, they can be confusing. It is true that, to an uninitiated reader, or a reader who refuses to initiate themselves, the various books and rules can seem labyrinthine. But it is NOT true that these things undermine the ease or the practicality of playing the game. To demonstrate this, I will produce a metaphor.

Sie trinkt deinen Apfelsaft.

The above is German. And 46 days ago, I would have had no idea what the hell that meant. None at all. And yet, somehow, it is possible to learn the language. It is possible for *anyone* to learn it. Two things are necessary: the will and the means.

I have wanted to learn German for a long time, and recently someone produced the means. A means which happened to coincide with my will. And here is the result:



I am quite proud of this achievement. The little flame symbol on the right with the 46 beside it represents the number of consecutive days that I have completed a lesson or practice sequence in the Duolingo

system. I discovered this system on my birthday, September 15th, and I have not missed a single day since. Today is the 46th day since my birthday, inclusive of my birthday.

I would not say I am finding German to be easy. I am crap at languages, I have always been crap at languages, and it has taken some will to dig in and adapt myself to the system. Duolingo teaches language the way it is taught to children. There are no lists of masculine, feminine or neuter nouns. There is no memorization or explanation of irregular verbs, or irregular pronouns. The language is learned by reading it and reproducing it, until one simply recognizes that it is "das Pferd" and not "die Pferd." For me personally, determiners in particular are frustrating as hell. But it doesn't matter. I'm not in a class, where a Prof is impatient with my progress. I'm not working with a program that insists I learn at a pre-arranged speed. I have all the time I like to practice whatever aspect of the language that I like, for as long as I like, and I comfort myself with the knowledge that German children have years and years to learn the language. There's no reason I should expect to produce miracles of knowledge in six weeks.

And still, I know a surprising amount of German now.

Is German difficult? Fucking A. It is confusing and labyrinthine? For me, so far, it sure gawddamn is. Is German ultimately counteractive to ease of communication?

Well obviously not. Germans have no more trouble communicating with one another than the reader does in this language.

COMPLEXITY does not equal impracticality.

In fact, I'd like to argue that in far more ways than I need to describe, *complexity improves practicality*.

This system that I am using right now, this collection of language, requires a considerable comprehension of words and ideas in order for it to work effectively ... and it took both the writer and the reader a couple of lifetimes to get to the point where what I say strikes home in a particular way. Striking home is the important element here. In order to do it, the requirement is that we BOTH understand what the rules are. We must both understand the meaning of every ... single ... word ... and we must both understand them in the exact ... same ... way. Otherwise it is impossible to get the sense of what I'm saying.

It's not enough that the words that have been created cover just the simple basics of life. The 172 words in German that I've learned thus far won't do! 10,000 words won't do. They won't let me understand Goethe and Nietzsche, they won't let me discuss medicine, politics and history - hell, they wouldn't be enough to allow me to discuss the manufacture of coffee. To precisely explain anything, I need all the words I can manage ... and my comprehension and value in the world depends both upon my ability to use those words and my ability to understand someone else using them.

DMs like the Red Box set because it is *easy to run* ... but it fails in so many regards. It has no rules for any of the things a party might want to do OUTSIDE the precepts of the simplistic game. If I want to establish a fortification, tax peasants, [find some bitches](#), have one of them give birth, raise a child, determine its stats at age 9, train that child, create a treaty with another state by which my child and the stateman's child marry, expand trade, expand the intellectual comprehension of my citizens, plant crops, shear sheep, suffer the weather, sail a boat, drive a dog team, improve my nutrition, avoid disease, etc., etc., **THERE ARE NO RULES.**

This means that, over and over, any time I get 'weird' in the game, I must return again and again to the defacto judgement of one person, the DM, who has already made it clear that *he or she would rather run a simple game by using simple rules*. How can I expect to have an impartial decision made by such a person, about something that person hasn't bothered to consider might be important?

I can't. The decision won't be impartial. It will be guided by an individual who has selfishly chosen his or her system for no other reason than that it is simple, and therefore not a lot of work. Using the argument that their "choice" is as reasonable as any other choice. Further supported by the fiction that "difficulty destroys play."

It's all bunk. It's laziness dressed up as libertarian self-righteousness. It's the sign of a BAD world, run by people for whom BAD is the standard, who expect you, the player, to conform to that standard because it conveniences them.

Dump it. Get into a better world. Run a better world. And let's stop pretending that this Pretense of Simplicity is anything more than pretense.

11. Wrong Play

<http://tao-dnd.blogspot.com/2013/10/wrong-play.html>

My [post earlier in the week](#) got these two comments:

From JDDarvis: *"It seems a lot of folks can't understand you can have fun playing a character that isn't a Sociopath so they don't make the leap."*

And from Jason Packer: *"I've encountered more than a handful of players who are unable to create a character who isn't an utter sociopath."*

I feel I must reply at length.

I have no particular problem with an individual *pretending to be* a sociopath at table, so long as their aware of their actions, and are able to view them with a certain necessary, desireable detachment ... i.e., "Yeah, we probably shouldn't have killed everyone in the village, that might have been a bit overboard, but hey - we couldn't leave witnesses, could we?"

Heck, that's fine. In actual life, the Mongols used to push people together in 'herds' of ten to fifty thousand, then spend days and days slaughtering them. The city of [Balkh](#), a great seat of learning prior to the 13th century, was destroyed and ceased to exist for a period - despite almost certainly having a population rivalling that of the fifty thousand people who were killed by the Mongols at Samarkand. I have yet to have a player character get really ambitious in that fashion ... though of course the template is there. I hardly have one source for mass killings upon which to draw.

(Though it should be said that with modern, politically correct historical rewrites of EVERYTHING that has ever happened throughout time, NONE of these things ever happened. They were just nasty rumours spread by people who did not like Mongols. Human beings do not actually do bad things ... except one completely anachronistic group of Germans, naturally)

If I had a character legitimately able to organize an army so as to repeatedly slaughter tens of thousands of NPCs and *get away with it*, then I think I'd be more impressed than appalled. I've read too much history and too many accounts of mass killings, from Cannae to Cambodia ... I'm too jaded to really have a problem with players 'killing' fictional descriptions of things.

I doubt that either Jarvis or Packer above do, either - though they can correct me if I'm in error. I think what they're referring to is the player who doesn't seem to know they're behaving with psychotic imbecility. The sort of thing where this conversation happens:

DM: You meet a old man on the road, making his way along with a gnarled cane; it is obviously difficult for him to walk, and it may be possible he hasn't eat in awhile.

Player: I kill him.

DM: I'm sorry?

Player: I take out my sword and split his skull open.

DM: Um, why?

Player: I feel like it (giggles). Do his brains run out over the cobblestones?

I've seen dozens of references to this kind of thing on blogs, most often with reference to the old man holding some secret or being intrinsic to a railroaded campaign, and now the DM has no way to tell the party where the princess is, blah blah blah. But the bigger point isn't what the player has lost by "acting hastily" or some other euphemism for being a RETARDED TIT, its the clear and obvious sign that one actually has a garden-variety sociopath sitting right at the gaming table. The player, that is, not the player's character.

Oh, probably not someone really dangerous ... there are probably no bodies in that player's backyard, that player probably hasn't the presence of mind to actually arrange and set up a murder without peeing themselves in a fit of fright and androgen deficiency. Nah, we're talking a sort of kind of ersatz socialized poster child failure who's raver parents operated with "on the fritz" efficiency during that all important formative diaper-to-toilet escalation.

Packer also added a [point](#) about how such persons being given the option of rolling a new character suffer a "non-punishment" for acting like pretty much like morons ... and that is mostly true. In any one's world by mine, that is.

See, I take a rather confrontational style with D&D, just as I take a confrontational style with real life. If I happen to be in a place where some sort of stupidity is taking place, all too often I'm inclined to speak out. I'm that fellow on the bus who tells you to turn your fucking headphones down. I'm the guy who, when standing in line behind someone screaming at the employee at the complaints counter, *gets involved*. When I see two Jesus freaks cornering some hapless and all too polite fellow on the street, I walk over and pick a theological argument. I *like* tearing born again Christians apart limb from limb and picking my teeth with the bones. That sort of propagandistic terror-spreading pisses me off more than I can express.

So if I have some hapless moron in my world, in my house mind, eating my food and making my chairs squeak, I'm not going to hold back. Fuck the game - what the fuck do you think you're doing, buddy? What are you here for? Are you aware there are four other people at the table? Are you aware of anything except

your own derisive self-aggrandizing kindergarten pud-pounding jizz-spreading happiness? Hm? Can you tell me just what exactly the fucking point of killing the old man was? Go on. I'm waiting.

These are things I'm saying while standing up, looking down at the player, ready for his answer and by little freaking gnomes in the well water, it better be a goddamn GOOD answer.

My game doesn't depend on the old man transmitting any information to the party. As I said in [Catskinning](#) the week before last, if I need to put forward that information, I will find another way. What I want to know is why is my precious time being wasted. It is MY time. It's expenditure matters to me. And if some fuck intends to spend it thoughtlessly, then I want that fuck to know plain and simple that I am not happy with the robbery.

Why is it I have a game, and I don't scare all my players away? *My players feel about this sort of the exactly the way I do.* And it is nice for them that they don't have to handle this sort of shit personally and get their hands dirty. They have me to get my hands dirty for them.

Punishment for wrong play? Oh yeah. In my world there is.

Ah, don't take it too much to heart. I'm channelling all sorts of emotions this week.