

*(The following an excerpt from the convention panel 'Life as a Role-Playing Game', an on-going effort to apply techniques learned from table-top and video game role-playing habits to daily living)*

## **Life As A Role-Playing Game**

Being an adult sucks.

Ask just about anyone in the modern western world what their thoughts are on being a functioning adult and most responses will involve some amount of profanity. Or an awkward laugh as they try to balance a mature answer (which usually sounds akin to Stockholm Syndrome) and being truly honest. In addition to profanity, most modern adults will include some commentary on how it's 'different than expected'.

I'm not sure where we get the impression of what adulthood should be versus how it is. I'm sure movies, TV, music, video games, advertising, and the like have something to do with it. Regardless, as most teens enter adulthood (which is happening later and later in life these days, but that's a discussion for a different time), many find themselves befuddled and confused. They complain about how hard it is, how unfulfilling it is, and how it simply isn't like what they were expecting.

What were they expecting?

That crack about movies, TV, music, video games, etc, wasn't just a one-off joke. It was a very genuine observation. Our expectations are informed by our exposure to the world. If our art reflects a different reality than our own, this incongruity between the two causes us stress. We look to art, yes, as an idealized form of reality but also as a manual for reality. We learn to speak, walk, and all the basic skills of life through emulation. Is it any surprise that we learn to be a functioning adult through emulation as well? And what are we emulating? Certainly not functioning depictions of adults!

Or are we?

Perhaps the problem isn't that art doesn't reflect reality. Perhaps the problem isn't that the 'real world' is so different from what we see in movies, TV, music, video games, etc. Perhaps the problem is we're simply missing a single perception on how to take the lessons of movies, TV, music, video games, etc and apply it to life proper.

For the purposes of this discussion, since movies, TV, and music, are passive forms of entertainment – meaning you watch/listen to them but you

rarely interact – we’re focusing on video games. And there’s no video game genre more applicable to modern life than that of the role-playing game.

So we’re going to be asking the question: why can’t life be like a role-playing game?

And the answer is, it can be.

So you might ask ‘What is a role-playing game?’

To that, I would first say ‘welcome to earth, please don’t judge us by our political leaders’. Secondly, I’d explain that a role-playing game is a simulation of a character’s narrative progression as seen in fiction. This is accomplished by following a character through multiple events in their lives and tracking their progress and improvement in the skills needed to deal with these events.

Unlike other types of stories and/or video games, role-playing games do not concern themselves with a single event but a series of events (sometimes a long series of events), tracing a character from their teen years (or even childhood) to their adult years (and sometimes even their death). Many role-playing games are composed of coming-of-age stories as that historically reflects the time period when a person goes through the single largest personal transformation in their life.

Okay, sounds good right?

Role-playing games appeal to many players as a simulacrum of real life (simulacrum = ten dollar word for simulation of, replacement for, and even projection onto, real life). Not a small number of role-players utter the phrase ‘why can’t life be more like [role-playing game of choice]?’ on a regular basis. Sometimes a daily basis. For some of us, it’s an hourly basis.

What do role-playing games offer (besides sword-fights, casting magic from the hand, and a lack of IRS audits) that makes them so much more appealing than regular life?

And more than that, what does life need to be more like a role-playing game?

The answers to both those questions are, in actuality, the same thing.

The answers to both of those questions are clear goals.

Disclaimer: ‘Give Me What I Want, Not What I Ask For’

A common reaction heard whenever anyone says 'I wish life was more like a role-playing game' is for some snarky bastard to always respond 'you mean you want to run everywhere you go, fighting gargantuan monsters at random, and having to constantly fight for your life?'. And while I know some fans will answer unequivocally yes (and even a few of them will genuinely mean it), I think most fans will hedge at that.

I suspect that what many fans find appealing about the games is the sense of action (which we'll discuss in a bit) and the sense of gravity. The sense of stakes. Most role-playing games (be they pen-and-paper or video game) involve stakes of world-ending potential. The fate of everyone and everything rests on the player-characters' shoulders.

While I think few people would ever truly want that responsibility, there is a certain level of envy to be of that importance, especially when many people these days find themselves with unfulfilling jobs of seeming little importance (at least at first glance). It isn't the violence and fighting they want but it is to feel important. It's to feel like their actions and decisions make a difference. We'll be discussing this as we go, but I want to draw attention to it because understanding this difference between fantasy and reality goes to the heart of living life as a role-playing game. It's about identifying the underlying desire and appeal, and not the surface simulation of it.

When you think about role-playing games – video games or tabletop – what is one of the first things that comes to mind? Character sheets? Leveling? Giant dusty tomes full of monster stats, experience points, and level bonuses? In short, numbers. Stats. Numerical representations of life. Even more generally, what do role-playing games have? Specifics. Role-playing games have specific.

Therefore, for life to be more like a role-playing game, life needs two things: clearly defined metrics and clearly defined goals.

That 'clearly defined' part is the key most people struggle with.

Looking back your life, do you ever find yourself wishing for 'the good ol' days' (or at least elements of them)? Do you think back to how much better school was in elementary school, or how much better life was a child? Part of the reason for that is, of course, our tendency as a species to romanticize the past (especially our own) and to forget the struggles at that time.

Another part of the reason those early days seem so appealing now is because everything was very clearly defined for us. What was expected of us was made perfectly obvious and spelled out crystal clear. Meeting those

expectations was (usually) met with praise. Failing to meet those expectations was usually met with instruction, not punishment. Our goals and objectives were clear and the manner in achieving them even more so.

Now what are things like as an adult? How many objectives are clearly laid out? How simple are the instructions to achieve those objectives? For proof, look no further than the simple act of getting job. It's very straightforward, isn't it? No, of course it isn't! Not even a little. There are so many variables, so many factors, so many issues that can weigh in that the sheer prospect of returning to the job hunt fills many adults with panic and fear. Many adults even endure abuse simply to avoid the chaotic uncertainty of job-hunting. That'd rather have misery than uncertainty.

In order to make our lives more like role-playing games, we must take a good look at our lives and our world and decide what are our objectives and how do we go about achieving them. We need to do away with ambiguity and uncertainty and deal in specific, actionable steps to achieve specific, stated goals.

The purpose of this article series (which is derived from the convention panel of the same name: convention organizers, email me to book appearances!) is to lay out a series of clearly defined steps to improve one's stats and to pursue one's chosen goals. Whether you're a completionist or a power leveler or speed-runner (and if you don't know what either of those are, don't worry), this series will help you to apply the lessons learned in role-playing games and apply them to life in the waking world.

Before we get started, though, let's take a moment to dispel some myths.

### **Myth #1 – The presence of multiple definitions means all definitions are valid, not any**

Richard 'I worked on the Manhattan Project' Feynman once quipped 'there are two types of genius: those who come up with a new way to do a thing, and those who see a totally new thing to do'. In short, you have the innovator-genius who improves upon the existing world and the creator-genius who creates an entirely new aspect to the world'.

So, which one is the true genius?

Not sure about comparing a vague notion like genius? Okay, let's make the discussion a little more physical: running. Who is the better runner, the sprinter or the marathoner? Or how about strength; who is stronger, the gymnast who can move their body seemingly effortlessly

through space, or the power lifter who can command untold weight off the ground?

These questions solicit wonderful discussions about applicability, situational use, and other of the endless variations of 'well, it depends'. And while rationally we may make allowances for specific situations where one type of intellect is advantageous over another, when we – society or individuals – have multiple definitions of a trait, we tend to think of all of them as valid, as opposed to any of them. What this means is that a person can only be called a genius if they meet BOTH qualifiers, creator and innovator. A person is only strong if they can be both gymnast and power-lifter, be a good runner if they are both sprinter and marathoner.

This means that if you list off five ways to describe a trait like being strong (or smart, or kind, or...) and only meet one of those definitions, you are likely to still think of yourself as not-strong. If there is a single possible criterion that is not met, it does not matter how many other criteria are met. Traits in the modern, adult world are typically viewed as completely polar. You either embody everything about the trait, or you simply are NOT the trait.

This gets further complicated when we consider different types of a trait. Taking intelligence for example, where we have academic intelligence (book learning), emotional intelligence (empathy), practical intelligence (street smarts), etc. We have all these different ways to qualify as 'intelligent', but we typically use them to disqualify one another as intelligent rather than recognize the multi-faceted reality of intelligence. We dismiss the academic genius as just being situationally smart. We dismiss the experienced journeyman's street smarts as not really smart, only a product of upbringing. We use these different categories to undermine ourselves and one another, rather than recognize and acknowledge.

The reality is that multiple definitions of a trait are meant to aid us in pursuing improvement, not disqualify us from considering ourselves accomplished. Achievement is not a polar matter where if you are incapable at any conceivable thing, you might as well be incapable at everything. You can choose one area to improve and be satisfied with just that. In fact, arguably, that is the path to true development.

## **Myth #2 – To be excellent at something, we must be excellent at everything about it**

Basketball is one of the most popular sports in the world, competing for popularity with other sports like cricket, rugby, and football (American or real, whichever version you prefer). To be excellent at basketball requires

mastery of innumerable skills, from the seemingly mundane (like dribbling) to the complex (like transition defense) to the impossible (like the three-point shot or understanding what constitutes a foul and what doesn't).

There is a belief that if you are only good at certain aspects of a sport, then you aren't really very good at that sport. If you're excellent at the lay-up (the most basic shot in basketball) but can't hit a three-pointer and don't have the jump height to make a dunk, you simply aren't that good of a player.

This is patently untrue.

In all situations, but especially in team sports like basketball, being good at 'only a corner of the game' is the path to success. Lay-ups may not excite the crowd like a three-pointer or a slam dunk, but that's where the majority of points are made in most basketball games. Having a command of a good lay-up is the basis upon which a team's strategy can be built.

Focusing on a few attributes not only helps secure success, but also elevates your whole performance. If there are a thousand ways you can be tested (in basketball, or at work, or wherever), you can never be ready for all of them. But if you carve out 'a corner' of your field and can say with the utmost confidence 'if nothing else, I will be good at \_\_\_\_\_', then you have the confidence to know that you aren't facing a thousand ways to be challenged, only a thousand minus \_\_\_\_\_'.

How about chemistry instead of basketball? How many different fields of chemistry are there? And each one has multiple sub-fields of study. No chemist knows ALL of chemistry, nor should they! What real benefit is there for a molecular chemist to have an in-depth understanding of non-organic zero-G chemistry? Yes, there is some crossover between the two disciplines and the chance of an once-in-a-lifetime interplay might come up is not zero, but that's hardly the way to plan your study and your daily work. And yet, that's how so many people view skills. 'Either be good at absolutely everything, or give up because nothing short of excellence in all areas means less the mediocrity'.

You don't have to be good at every conceivable aspect of 'the game' (whether that game is basketball or chemistry or auto repair or whatever). You have to be good at what you need to be good at and what you choose to be good at. Everything else is basically contingency planning.

### **#3 – If Joanne did it, Daphne should do it too**

Joanne wanted to lose twenty pounds for beach season. She went to the gym three times a week and did half an hour on the elliptical and cut out

all carbs from her diet. If Daphne wants to do the same thing, doing what Joanne did will work for her, right?

Anybody who has ever exercised or followed a diet knows the answer already.

Just because something works for one person does not mean it will work for every other person. Everybody has that one friend who did everything right and failed miserably, or the friend that did the opposite of common knowledge and achieved success. There are innumerable factors that can determine success or failure in a given pursuit. Sometimes, these factors are obvious (details in a diet, workout program, studying habits, etc) and sometimes these factors are impossible to determine (like genetics, personal disposition, etc).

Even if two people have the same goal and follow exactly the same plan, the results may not (and are likely not) to be the same. Whether it is dieting, exercise, studying, it doesn't matter. Success for one is not automatic to be success for another.

This doesn't mean you can't look at how others achieved success to find a way to achieve success. It means that an individual experience is just that: individual. Your results may vary (perhaps radically). If they do vary, do NOT blame yourself. People will attempt to lose weight, try a diet, fail, and blame themselves. "I just can't lose weight". There's nothing wrong with them. And there may be nothing wrong with the diet. It's that even the best diets in the world find adherents who don't respond predictably to them.

#### **#4 – If Joanne did it and succeeded, she succeeded because she did it**

Joanne wanted to compete in a fitness competition. She trained three times a day, five days a week, and ate an incredibly strict diet. She went to the competition and blew the judges away, taking the top prize. Clearly, three-times-a-day, five-days-a-week is the recipe for success at the fitness competition, right?

Not necessarily.

What if Joanne's training included three heavy-weight workouts a week and it was her strength and muscularity that impressed the judges? What if the other workouts were largely superfluous? That would mean that of those fifteen workouts a week, only three workouts really mattered. The other twelve were largely a waste of time, or worse, they actually hampered

Joanne's progress. What if Joanne had skipped those other twelve workouts and might have done EVEN BETTER?

You see this from time to time in sports, where the athlete that works harder and trains more intensely sometimes is NOT the one who wins the championship. Exercise, like most things in life, is a balancing act and pushing too hard can sometimes be as detrimental as not pushing hard enough.

'I did a thing and I achieved my goal, ergo the thing I did helped me achieve my goal' is called confirmation bias. It assumes that what you did was appropriate for the goal you achieved. Confirmation bias is a form of the expression 'confusing correlation with causation'. That you wore green socks to the job interview and got the job doesn't necessarily mean green socks had anything to do with your performance, yet it's the same logic.

The takeaway from this is to beware of people who lay out their path of success with it 'it worked for me'. Did it? Did you succeed because of this, or was there a chance you succeeded in spite of this?

## **#5 – Paralysis by Analysis**

#3 and #4 lead to a lot of confusion. So if it worked for Joanne but it might not work for Daphne, or if it may not have even worked for Joanne, then how do I know which thing to do? Which is the best method?

Down the path towards 'best' lies only madness.

Save yourself the headache trying to decide on the best workout, the best diet, the best studying method, the best whatever. There is no 'best' method, for anything. There is no 'best' method for learning a new language, studying for an exam, putting on five pounds of muscle, losing twenty pounds of fat, getting better sleep, etc. There is no 'best'. Stop trying to find it.

There are methods that work, and they come in varying degrees of success. The 'best' method is the one that A) works for you, B) you stick with, and C) you enjoy.

A is critical. If the method doesn't work, the rest of it doesn't matter. So long as it works, B becomes the next consideration because you have to be able to stick with it. No matter how much you enjoy it, the ability to see a program through to completion (however you define it) is ultimately critical for success. Many a gym-goer has let their membership slide, no matter how much they enjoyed it, because they just 'couldn't make it'. C is likewise critical. If it works and you can stick with it but don't enjoy it, it

becomes a chore and one that you will likely come to hate. Very few people have the ability to stick to a thing they don't enjoy.

Paralysis by analysis is a term from the exercise community meaning the novice's penchant for trying to find the absolute best and most perfect exercise program. Being overwhelmed by the options, by the sheer variety of workouts, they either never get started as they constantly try to find that one perfect workout or they constantly jump from one workout to the next, going after whatever looks like it will be 'better'.

Don't worry about best. Don't worry about perfect. Find a program that works, you can stick with, and you will enjoy. "But program B includes \_\_\_\_!" Good for program B. Stick to what you're doing and let it work for you. Pick what looks reasonable based off your initial criteria and then trust your instinct. Don't go chasing the greener grass in another field.

This doesn't mean you're stuck with whatever plan you first selected. Change if you want to, but only if you've A) reached your goal and are ready to try something new/different or B) what you're doing has stopped working. Don't jump to another program just because you think it will work faster. Don't switch just because you think another lane is faster. At least not until you feel comfortable driving.

Do not concern yourself with optimal; concern yourself with progress. So long as you are making the progress you want to make, pursuing the goal you wish to pursue, who cares when you get there? So what if you might be able to achieve your goal in a slightly shorter time? Progress is what matters. Of course, if you make progress and want to keep improving, then you can spend some time worrying about optimal, then you can experiment and try out new approaches. Once you've got some momentum, then you can think about ways to build up speed.

There are so many myths connected to life and how to live it that many of us find ourselves unable to even find the starting point when it comes to pursuing our dream self. We say things like 'I want to learn a second language, but...' and what follows is always a laundry list of reasons why it never comes about. Some are valid, to be sure, but far more are troubles, not true oppositions. They're a struggle because of old myths that we believe, myths we needn't believe.

If we dispel the myths that have been built up in our lives – the half-truths, the assumptions, all of it – what we discover is that the game of life is much simpler than it seems. Life ceases to be a complex and nightmarish scenario with too many moving parts to ever manage and instead turns into a game that we can play, a game we can enjoy, and a game we can win.

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We'll call it here for now, but stay tuned.

In future installments, I'll be going into greater detail as to how to pursue the game of life and how to play it like a role-playing game.