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[Muse] Play Summary from Oct 16th at Roludothon 5


Demiurge

October 2011 edited October 2011

Hi,

Here's a [Muse](#) actual play report from the session I ran yesterday Oct. 16th at Roludothon 5 in Montreal. We ended up being 5 people: Jonathan (myself), Charles, Benoit, Florian and Eric. Here's the Story Sheet that we came up with, along with a summary of the story we ended up telling:

Story Sheet

Story Seed: In modern day Montreal with a magical twist, a Mage transforms people into animals and forces them to work in his mine.

Character: Rudy, transformed into a bat the Mage uses as a spy, used to be a hair-dresser for the wealthy and an informant to tabloid journalists.

- **Goal:** To be a rich and famous music star.
- **Relationship:** Best friends with Melody (Pyke's ex-wife).
- **Relationship:** Rose (a music producer's daughter) was one of Rudy's regular clients at her hair salon.

Character: Pyke, transformed into a bison, was an uneducated street boxer from out West. Was an alcoholic, was and still is angry at the world.

- **Goal:** To free himself and save his son.
- **Relationship:** Had a son with Melody, a drug-addict who went to Montreal with their son without telling Pyke.
- **Relationship:** Pyke wants to kill, and possibly eat, Bob.

Character: Bob, transformed into an octopus, was a failed MBA graduate that ended up becoming a one-man band street performer. Has a stutter.

- **Goal:** Wants to date Rose, who even before his transformation was not interested; presumably because of his stutter.
- **Relationship:** Is managing the mine for the Mage in exchange for a promise to have his stuttering cured. He was turned into an octopus after he rifled through some of the Mage's magical secrets, but kept his job.

Scene: The foreman's office, a half-aquarium where Bob works.

Scene: A mine shaft, where animals dig for alchemical ingredients under Mount Royal.

Scene: The Biodome, where the captured animal/people live and the Mage grows his Manna plants (which provide magical power when eaten) using the mine's alchemical ingredients. Connects to the mine via the Purple Subway line, which was never finished and later forgotten.

Threat: Due to a rival mage's magical influence, it is falsely appearing like the mine is running out of materials. If the Mage becomes convinced that the mine has run dry, he will kill the animals and retire.

Threat: Rose and Melody have fallen in love and will be leaving Montreal soon with Pyke's son.

Crisis Question: Will Pyke get free and save his son? [Yes]

Question: Will Bob Steal Pierre Bourque's Grimoire? [No]

Question: Will Rudy find Rose? [No]

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All Categories	21.4K
Story Games	11.2K
Actual Play	1.7K
Make Stuff!	613
Play Advice	1.5K
Stuff to Watch	593
Directed Promotion	2.3K
Forum Discussion	441
Game Design Help	1.5K
Meetups / Conventions	1.5K
The Sandbox	60
The Best of Story Games	52

Question: Will Bob date Rose? [Yes, answered in Epilogue]

The Story

The story begins with Bob ordering Pyke into a new section of the mines. Pyke pulls a mine cart full of moles to the new area and starts digging. While digging, they find alchemical rocks with a strange property that, upon first exposure, seems to allow the moles to speak to each other like humans. Pyke grabs a quantity of the rock for himself.

Meanwhile, Rudy had spied Bob's strange behaviour and reports it to the Mage. It turns out that the Mage is none other than Pierre Bourque, former mayor of Ville-Marie (Montreal downtown) before the city become "one island, one city." Bourque is disturbed to learn that Bob has ordered digging in a new area of the mine and decides to investigate. Bourque, annoyed, idly threatens Rudy's life. She takes the threat seriously and flees the mine via an air shaft.

Unknown to anyone else, Bob has been being manipulated telepathically by a nearby magical scarab beetle (an agent of Bourque's rival mage) into thinking that the normal mine shafts had run out of materials, and into digging in a new shaft that contains an anti-magic alchemical rock.

Pyke eats a small amount of the alchemical material and partially returns to human form, becoming a minotaur-like creature. He and the moles all end up in a stupor as a result of the alchemy's effects. Bob, after he fails to contact the mining team, leaves his watery home to investigate. When he finds the mining team and sees the effects of the special rock, he grabs some for himself. As he hurries back to his cistern, Bob gets more and more dehydrated. He finally arrives and collapses into the water unconscious. The rock dissolves and Bob absorbs it through his gills.

Rudy flies to her old apartment, and looks through the window. Inside she sees Rose, Melody and Pyke's son (although she doesn't recognize the latter). Melody declares that she needs her drug fix. Melody and her son leave to get some narcotics, while Rose departs to go elsewhere. Melody and Rose both enter the Metro (subway) system, but go in opposite directions. Rudy desperately follows Rose.

The Mage, Pierre Bourque, arrives at Bob's office only to find him restored to human form. Bourque immediately transforms Bob into a beaver, and leaves to restore order to the rest of the mining complex.

Pyke wakes up and he and the mining team decide to try to escape the mine by digging into the functioning metro tunnel. This causes a partial collapse of the tunnel, and all of the metro cars go to an emergency stop. Rose and Rudy are stuck in one West-bound metro car, while Melody and her son are stuck in a different East-bound car.

Bob sees that his mine map has been updated (secretly by the rival mage) to show the new exit that Pyke just created. He rushes to escape. On his way, he discovers that the partial tunnel collapse has revealed an entrance into Bourque's secret Mage lair. There, Bob spots Bourque's magical Grimoire (which holds the secrets of all of his spells) laying on a lectern. Bob, still a beaver, tries to get his paws on the book. Unfortunately, a guardian cobra strikes him down [the Question "Will Bob Steal Pierre Bourque's Grimoire?" got answered with No].

Pyke's son, who is stuck in a metro car, escapes from his mother Melody and goes exploring. Melody runs after him and is killed when the unstable ceiling falls on her. Her son, who doesn't know that his mother is dead, continues exploring. He finds himself in Bourque's lair, where both Bob the beaver and the cobra are now gone. Pyke's son, intrigued by all the magical paraphernalia, drinks a beaker at random. It partially transforms him into a bison, making him a minotaur-like creature just like his father. Bourque's rival mage arrives and finally reveals himself to be none other than Georges Brossard, the founder of the Montreal Insectarium. He uses his insect servants to transform Pyke's son back into a boy and promises to help him however he can.

Rudy attempts to communicate with Rose by fluttering into her hair and giving her a spontaneous new hairdo. Rose, who is terrified of bats, freaks out and flees the stalled metro car. Rose breaks into an employee bathroom in her attempt to escape Rudy. There, Rose looks into the mirror and realizes that

her hair now looks very much like how her hairdresser Rudy would have made it. Rose looks at Rudy, who is still a bat, but fails to realize that the bat is Rudy [the Question "Will Rudy find Rose?" gets answered with a No]. Rose leaves the bathroom. Rudy tries to follow but in her haste she crashes into something and falls onto the metro tracks (which have 10,000 volts running through them).

Bob wakes up in a back room at the Biodome, chained to the wall, naked, and back in human form (presumably the near-death experience restored him to human shape). Bob uses what magic he stole from Bourque to shrink himself slightly and escape from the manacles. He finds a raincoat and flees outside. He finds a phone booth to call his brother and ask for help.

[The Crisis Question "Will Pyke get free and save his son?" is answered with a Yes and the game now enters the Epilogue phase]

Pyke, having cleared himself out of the fallen rubble, notices the entrance into Bourque's lair. He enters and finds his son and Brossard there. It's at this moment that Bourque arrives as well via teleportation--he was warned by his magical wards that something was amiss. Brossard and Bourque have a magical battle whereupon Bourque is defeated and forced to dispel all of his magic. Pyke returns to human form and is reunited with his son.

Rose exits the metro system and runs into Bob as he is making his telephone call. Bob sees her and professes his love for her. It would seem that his experiences have cured him of his stuttering, so he does a decent job of it. Bob accidentally flashes Rose as his raincoat falls open. Rose's eyes widen and she decides that perhaps she isn't finished with men after all [the Question "Will Bob date Rose?" had remained unanswered up to the Epilogue, but I narrated a Yes answer to it during the Epilogue].

Finally, Rudy wakes up, naked and in human form, in between the two metro tracks somewhere in the metro system.

THE END

Designer's Notes on the Game

- The setup phase took much longer than usual: 1 hour instead of the usual 30 minutes. I'm not sure why, perhaps because there were 5 people? I typically play with 3-4. Or it might just have been the high level of enthusiasm.
- The players had a bit of trouble wrapping their heads around the idea of a storytelling game. It was a good two hours before they really got rolling, at which point they finally *got it* and the pace of the game picked up significantly moving into the last hour.
- After the game, the players all told me they had a good time for which I'm very happy. I myself think it was a medium success, only because I've played games that ran much more smoothly. I think the trouble was a combination of playing with more people than usual, it being the first time for most of the players, probably a poor explanation of the rules on my part, and the fact that the session revealed some flaws in the current rule set.

Some rules I'm considering changing:

1. Most importantly, the rule where the Narrator could get a card when narrating something cool seemed to ruin the mechanic for checking off story elements by narrating details about them. This caused a major loss of colour in the game and I think contributed to some of the initial chaos in the story. Most of the story elements never even got explicitly mentioned during narration! Good early description of all of the story elements really helps to ground the story. I'm thinking that the rules fix here is that at the start of the game the Narrator can only draw a card for narrating a description of a story element. Only when all story elements have been checked off will the "cool narration" rule come into effect.
2. Once again at the Crisis Question Showdown some of the players were dismayed when they were not able to use the cool card combinations they had been able to accumulate during the course of the session. During the Showdown, I supported the Yes side with a 2 and created a pair of 2s,

and won the game for Charles (with me as Supporter) because no-one else could play a single card that would create a pair for the No side. I'm thinking that I should amend the rules to allow any number of cards of the same rank to be played when supporting. This way if people accumulate great combos for the end then they at least get the chance to play them.

3. Judging by how much more hectic things can get with 5 players, and how much less active play time you get, I'm going to eliminate the rules for more than 6 players. There's no way that more than 6 players will be fun.
4. The rules currently allow for 3-5 main characters, but I think that 3 is plenty. I've never played with more than that and it's always been fine. I can only imagine more than 3 characters making it too hard to keep everything in your head at once.

Questions? Comments?

Sincerely,

--Jonathan

Comments



Paul_T

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Jon,

Sounds like an interesting game, from a playtesting point of view! I strongly agree with your thoughts on your points #3 and #4, but will have to think further on #1 and #2.

For #1, maybe you were being too lax with the reward for exciting narration? How can there be no description while everyone was grooving on the quality of the narration? It sounds like maybe the players were enjoying it that way: is it possible that it's not a design issue but a personal taste issue? (Just a guess, here, I'm not certain at all.)

For #2, I can remind you of my original idea, which was that you could play any card or cards that matched either the suit or the rank of a card already in play. So, if you have a 2 of Clubs, you can add in any 2s and any Clubs, as you like, when Turning the Tides. I'm not sure the additional complexity is worth it, although it's still a fairly simple rule!



Demiurge

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Hey Paul,

Posted By: Paul T.

Sounds like an interesting game, from a playtesting point of view! I strongly agree with your thoughts on your points #3 and #4, but will have to think further on #1 and #2.

Cool. I agree with you that points 1 and 2 are more controversial and would definitely need to be playtested before being released. 3 and 4 can be eliminated without trouble since those parts of the game have never been used anyhow.

For #1, maybe you were being too lax with the reward for exciting narration?

Since any player could pass over a card, there was no way to prevent it from happening almost every turn... Being more strict would require some sort of rule change, no?

How can there be no description while everyone was grooving on the quality of the narration?

That is a very good question. Here's what I think happened: we spent a whole hour creating the Story Sheet, which was 2-3 times normal. Maybe most of the players had a good idea in their heads of what the story elements were like?

Most of the early narration was purely plot-based (characters doing stuff)--possibly a holdover from players used to acting in roles in RPGs? Maybe in the past my Muse games have attracted more GM types that are used to describing? In any case, players really liked the ideas coming forth and cards kept being given to the Narrator turn after turn. Having more players than typical may have contributed as well.

It sounds like maybe the players were enjoying it that way: is it possible that it's not a design issue but a personal taste issue? (Just a guess, here, I'm not certain at all.)

This is a good point. The players were definitely enjoying themselves and the narrations. One player remarked that the "fun factor" was there for him from start to finish during the game.

Nonetheless I feel that it's really important for the early game to put detail on the story elements. This colour is the primary thing that separates a living story from a plot outline. Players *were* adding some colour, just not as much as I'm used to. Also, the Story Sheet ended up with only 3 checked off elements whereas they usually ALL get checked off.

For #2, I can remind you of my original idea, which was that you could play any card or cards that matched either the suit or the rank of a card already in play. So, if you have a 2 of Clubs, you can add in any 2s and any Clubs, as you like, when Turning the Tides. I'm not sure the additional complexity is worth it, although it's still a fairly simple rule!

I'll keep this in mind. But what does the rule seek to accomplish?

Unfortunately, there's a lot going on in Showdowns:

- A. Players need to get the chance to play cards so they can Support a side and get involved (right now this is mediocre, as soon as someone plays a pair it often ends the showdown immediately).
- B. The strategy of understanding which cards to play during the game and which cards to keep for the end needs to not be too complicated (right now the strategy is a bit convoluted)
- C. Drawing more cards, even if some of them get discarded once you reach a full hand, should translate to story power (right now this is *not* working, hence my feeling for why players are getting frustrated during the Crisis Question Showdown).
- D. Players should be encouraged to Support the Answer Sheet with the fewest cards because that one will have the higher odds of winning (right now this is ok due to the rule for discarding all but the lowest card, but it's not great since Turning the Tides kind of makes this moot, and may even improve the odds for the side that's initially losing).

I guess we need to take a look at the Showdown rules again and figure out something elegant that works for all of the above cases.

--Jonathan



Demiurge

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Hey Paul,

I put some serious thought into this the other day and did some testing and came up with the following ideas:

1. When flipping over Answer Sheet cards, the side with more cards keeps only its lowest card as usual. However, for the side with fewer cards, the side owner gets to choose which card to use. This improves the odds for the underdog side to win because it makes combos more likely, and solves issue D above.
2. While turning the tides, players can play a single card or multiple cards all of the same rank. This solves B and C. In particular, the card-keeping strategy is now very simple because you basically want to hold onto rank combos and high cards.

3. While turning the tides, all players have the chance to play a card (or combo) if they wish [Edit: the played card or combo must still be better than what is on the other side]. This means that the uninvolved players will almost always be able to become Supporters if they're willing to pay a card. This solves issue A.

It would take some playtesting, but I think that using the above rules would solve the Showdown issues Muse has been having.

What do you think?

--Jonathan



Paul_T
October 2011

Jon,

It's certainly not an *elegant* fix, but it does look like it hits your design goals. It's worth a try!



Demiurge
October 2011

If you can think of something better then I'm all ears! :-) I'll keep thinking about it leading up to my next playtest. Maybe I can come up with something more elegant (i.e. easier to remember and explain)...

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