



AN INTRODUCTION TO FREE FORM GAMES

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There are two types of RPing. Gaming and freeforming. Here is an introduction to free form games:

by Andrew Rilstone - 1991
[comments by Gwaredd - 1995]

What's the difference between real life and roleplaying? In real life there are no game mechanics to worry about - you don't have to roll dice and look at a rulebook every time you decide to walk down the street!

There's been a growing tendency in role playing games towards simpler and simpler rule systems - but is it possible to run a completely systemless RPG with no rules or numbers at all?

The basic concept behind freeforming is very simple. Most gamers are familiar with the idea of live role playing, the sort of games where you dress up as your character then go on an adventure in some woods or a castle. A freeform game is alive action scenario with no non=player characters or 'monsters' but with a very large number of PCs. Each player becomes one character and is given a very detailed description of that character - their aims, their ambitions, what they know



about other PCs and so on. The only rule of the game is that each player must play the part of the character they've been given for the duration of the scenario, and never step out of character. And unlike conventional LRP, which can range over a whole world, freeform games are generally limited to one or two rooms.

You may think this would be dull compared with a more traditional, open-ended game. And its adventure will have much less actual action than an over-the-table game or traditional live-action adventure [aka modular - Gwaredd]. But this doesn't necessarily make them dull - just the contrary: slam-bang action is replaced with role playing and character interaction.

In a freeform game, you could play any one of the following characters.

An undercover police officer in a cyberpunk world, who's trying to find an escaped replicant in a sleazy bar full of bikers and drug dealers; or the replicant, or the leader of one of the cycle gangs - or even the barman, who must want to make sure there's no trouble. There are no NPCs in freeforming, remember!

A notorious pirate, who's visiting the lair of a powerful bandit lord in order to attend a great council of thieves and criminals - or a spy from the king who's risked his life to attend that same council.

A rock'n'roll star from the far future, who finds himself marooned in deep space along with Pontiff of the Intergalactic Church, the dictator of a nearby planet, and three strange aliens, when the luxury starliner they're travelling on malfunctions [Hmm, sounds familiar - Gwaredd]

As you can see, the typical freeform puts players into situations in which they'll be required to intrigue, back-stab or just plain role play, where they have to talk to other characters. And so long as they stay in character, they can do whatever they like.

Why Run a Freeform?

Freeform games are fun. The kick of dressing up as a barbarian, walking into a room laid out like a tavern, pounding your fist on the bar and saying 'Ale, bar-keep!' is not something you often get out of conventional games.

At a more serious level, freeform games can encourage a depth of role playing you don't often get in table-top RPGs. A freeformer is their designated character from



the moment they step into the room to the moment the game is over; everything the player does, their character does too.

This means that freeform players can really get involved in roleplaying their characters.

On a lighter note, if all the players have come in costume freeform games can be very spectacular events. When you're standing with 30 other players all of whom have their faces painted green and are dressed in furs, you don't have to imagine what an orcish lair would look like - you're there!

Finally, because freeform games are completely systemless, they're a great way to introduce new players to the hobby. I know people who like the idea of playing the roles of fantasy or SF characters but hate the thought of dice and rulebooks. Freeform games are an ideal way of showing those people what fun role gaming can be [See Comment 1 at the end - Gwaredd].

Writing Your Own Freeform

Enough hype. Supposing you want to give freeform gaming a try: how do you go about it? As referee, the most important part of your job is to write the scenario. This means writing out detailed character sheets for every player character in the game. Most table-top RPG referees I know ad lib odd bits of their scenario, and some make the whole thing up as they go along - but in freeforming, everything has to be done in advance.

If you've devised an interesting set of characters, with lots of connections, quarrels, disagreements and secrets, you'll have a good freeform. If you botch it, everyone is going to be very bored.

The first thing to do is to decide on the setting for your game. Choose the genre of freeform you want to run - science fiction? Fantasy? Cyberpunk? - then come up with a single-room setting [or group of rooms, depending on where you'll be running it - Gwaredd].

Possible settings include:

- o Taverns - It doesn't matter whether it's the Vulgar Unicorn or Mos Eisley cantina - a bar is a place where hundreds of different characters congregate. Almost any science fiction or fantasy character can come into a bar at some point, and there's



no end to the number of plots which can develop. Two old enemies might confront each other over a drink; a thief could meet the man he fences his stolen goods to; the inquisition might storm the tavern because they believe a witch is hiding out in there. The only problem is that the players have to be prepared to swallow the rather big 'coincidence' that so many interesting characters have all turned up on the same night.

o Ships

A ship - a sailing boat, a starship, or for that matter the first class compartment of the Orient Express - is another good setting, suited to slightly smaller scale freeforms.

o Meetings and Councils

The lords and nobles of the kingdom have arrived at the king's palace for a great council to decide the future of the kingdom; the representatives of all the races in the galaxy have gathered on a neutral planet for a peace conference; a group of Mafia hoods have met in an Italian restaurant to discuss the family business. Settings like this are ideal for freeforms if you want a game of intrigue and backstabbing.

Whatever setting you choose it's helpful if you can create a little scenery for it. This is much easier than it sounds. If your game is set in a tavern, then it should be pretty easy to set up tables at one end to represent the bar and smaller tables around the room for people to put their drinks on. Suggest what's going on and the player's imaginations will do the rest.

Next, you need to decide on the basic theme of the game and who all the main characters are going to be. A freeform plot has got to be fairly complicated: ideally, every PC should need to talk to every other PC in order to sort out what's going on. As referee, the best approach is to take a simple idea for a plot and then complicate it as much as you can.

An example ought to show how relatively easy this can be:

Suppose we've decided to run a high fantasy freeform, set in a medieval world full of political intrigue. The setting is to be the great hall of the king's palace where more ordinary folk can bring their petitions to the King.

A basic idea for such a game might go something like this: Good King Thomas has recently died, leaving his son, Prince Richard to inherit the throne. All the nobles of the kingdom have gathered to witness his coronation. But Prince Richard is a

very nasty piece of work, and many people in the kingdom think that his younger brother, Prince Harold, would make a better king,

This is a good straightforward theme, which already gives us two main characters - bad Prince Richards and good Prince Haraold. But a simple conflict between a good prince and a bad prince is far too simple for a freeform game

So let's see if we can start to complicate the game shall we? Although many common people and some nobility would like Prince Harold on the throne, he's completely loyal to his brother: as far as he's concerned, if Richard's the eldest son, he must be allowed to be king. That mean that at least some of the senario will involve the nobles trying to persuade Prince Harold to start a rebellion against his brother - and Harold having to decide whether he ought to warn Richard or not. Character interaction of this sort is what freeforms are all about.

But this is still too simple, so I'll introduce another level into the plot:

Prince Harold is betrothed to marry Lady Mary. But Mary's brother was recently murdered by one of Richard's men over some insult or other. To make matters worse, Sir Fredrick, another of Richard's men, is also in love with Lady Mary, and will stop at nothing to make her his bride.

From such a simple plot idea we have already generated basic ideas for the following characters:

Prince Richard
Prince Harold
A Nobleman who wants Harold to be King
Lady Mary
The man who killed Mary's Brother
Sir Frederick

As referee you just carry on adding characters until you have one for each player. It's difficult to run an interesting freeform with less than ten players - 20 or more is ideal.

Every character should be conected in some way to several other characters, and have some interest in at least one of the plots that is going on. This is vitally important: there can be no minor characters in freeforms. Of course, Prince Richard might be more important than, say the humble serving lad, but if the

serving lad doesn't have major plots as well no-one will want to play him. No-one wants to play a character who's just a butler. But if that butler is trying to hide his best friend in the castle, because this friend has been accused of murder, the character would suddenly become interesting to play. Perhaps the butler has dressed his best friend up as a serving lad - and perhaps one of the noble guests at the feast was a witness to the murder .. see how easy it is to confuse people.

Once you've established who all the characters are, it then remains to write out the character sheets telling players everything they need to know about their characters and the game's background.

Running Your Freeform

The referee doesn't control a freeform game in the way he does a table-top game - that's the main reason they're called freeforms! Once the character sheets are written it's the players who are in control of the game.

But there are still plenty of things for the referee to worry about. The first thing for the referee to decide is whether or not they want to play a character. Some freeforms referees prefer to stay out of costume, acting only as an observer and umpire - as they would be in a main stream LRP game. But the more successful your game is, the less the referee will have to do. The perfect freeform would just about run itself, and there's not much point in the referee sitting about doing nothing!

So when I referee freeform games I generally take a part of an important and powerful character, but one who's not involved in many of the plots and intrigues. In the court intrigue scenario described above, I might play the part of an archbishop who job it is to crown the new king and act as master of ceremonies.

This would put me in a position where I, as referee can exercise some control over the direction the game is taking without stepping out of character and detract from the atmosphere. It's much better for the archbishop to say 'You knights - put your swords away! How dare you quarrel before the king!' than for the referee to say 'Time out. Sorry, no fighting please, it's against the rules.'

When is the referee likely to have to intervene in the game? I have found that the three most difficult parts of freeforming are The Beginning, The Middle and The End

The Beginning

There can sometimes be a very embarrassing half-hour at the beginning of a freeform game where the players stand around staring at each other, and can't think of anything to do.

The first way to avoid this problem is to stagger the arrival times of the players. If your freeform is to kick off at 6 pm have some characters arrive at 6:15, some at 6:30 and so on. Each new group of characters ought to come as a surprise to at least some of the others, and this uncertainty should keep people interested and on their toes throughout the awkward initial stage of the game.

It also helps to have some specific even planned to happen near the beginning of the scenario, shortly after all the characters have arrived. This need not be anything too dramatic: it might be something as simple as, say announcing that all the main characters must formally introduce themselves before the king - or perhaps an important plot revelation. In our hypothetical court intrigue scenario, it might be a good idea for the player characters not to know about the death of the old king. In that case, the freeform would begin with the various nobles and other characters arriving, expecting to pay their respects to the old man. Three-quarters of an hour into the game, the referee - in the roll of archbishop - announces that the king is dead. A revelation like that is usually enough to get everyone role playing.

The Middle

Freeforms can also get bogged down at the halfway point. All the characters have introduced themselves to each other and the first stage of interaction and intrigue are over. At this point, players can be running out of things to do.

Again, it's useful if the referee has some event planned up his sleeve. Using our example once more, it might be that halfway through the scenario the archbishop announces it's time for Prince Richard's coronation. This means that all the various power blocks will have to make their moves quickly, or it will be too late. It also means that the second half of the game will be a little different from the first half - because one or other of the brothers will be king, and will have to decide what to do with his newfound power.

If this approach fails, the referee may be required to 'cheat' slightly. If a freeform is becoming boring [heaven forbid - Gwaredd], it can quite often be livened up if the referee simply whispers to a number of player characters something like 'it's time to make a move - if you think you know who the murderer is accuse him; if you're going to challenge your old enemy to a duel, do it in the next few minutes!' At least two or three PCs will heed this advice and take some dramatic action - and the



event will suddenly be on its feet again.

The End

If you're lucky, the scenario sometimes comes to a dramatic end all by itself, with no help from the referee. Someone pulls out a sword - a brief skirmish develops. Several noblemen are dead - the murderers flee - the king's knights pursue them: the meeting has broken up'

Once most of the PCs have left the room, the game is obviously over, although it's often fun to call the players back together and ask them what they did after they left - what happened to them 'off stage' after the party broke up.

Another approach which occasionally works is for the referee to take the roll of very minor character in the game - a man-at-arms or a servant, say. When the referee wants to finish the session, he can slip out of the room, change costumes and re-enter.

In one of my freeforms, I spent the bulk of the game playing a mad jester. Half an hour before I wanted the game to finish, I slipped out of the rooms and changed costumes, and entered as the Evil Dark Lord - which brought the scenario to a pretty apocalyptic conclusion; in another, a pirate tavern emptied in three seconds flat when the governor arrived. In a freeform set in a tavern, of course, it's possible for the referee to end the game by calling 'time'. In a more courtly game the king might decide it was time to leave.

If all else fails, the referee can wind things up by turning out the lights on and loudly shouting 'Cut!' or 'Time Out'.

Help and Advice

Finally a few pieces of practical advice:

Make sure that there aren't too many weapons around; otherwise the whole thing can quickly degenerate into a very short barroom brawl. In a tavern, it might be that the bouncer takes weapons off all characters as they come in; in a formal game players might have to present their weapons to the king. The odd duel or fight can make these games very lively, but 30 people duelling in one room is chaotic and possibly dangerous.

o I normally arrange for some sort of refreshments at my freeforms. I always enforce a no alcohol rule - it's bad enough to referee someone who's pretending to be drunk without them getting tipsy for real.

o And finally, I never allow cameras into my games - I can't think of a better way of ruining the atmosphere. I generally arrange a photocall after the game is over so people have records of all their wonderful costumes.

[Note 1 : I agree that it is a good way of introducing ROLE PLAYING as a hobby. However for younger players (eg 12 - 18), I suggest that you don't introduce them to this style of role playing until they get to grips with the basic concepts through other games.]

Hope you enjoyed that :)

