

# LIVE BY THE SWORD, DIE BY THE SWORD?

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Those new to *RuneQuest 6* are often excited by the revisions to its classic combat system, predominantly the Special Effects that make fights far more dynamic, exciting, and fast. However these refinements have given rise to the opinion that *RuneQuest* is a very deadly system.

In part this is true. Combat can be exceptionally dangerous when the rules are utilised in a deliberately brutal and murderous way, yet the game has been designed to allow victory by using non-fatal techniques. So why is killing such an issue, and what can a Game Master do to lessen the impact of physical conflict?

## ROLLSPELSRUNOR I FENIX

Spelkonstruktören Pete Nash inleder här sina krönikor till *RuneQuest 6* som vi valt att kolla *Rollspelelrunor*. Vi hoppas artikelserien blir omtyckt av er läsare och en värdig arvtagare till *RuneRites*.



"This first article is more an approach to gaming piece, rather than gaming material per se - being inspired by a recent thread on one of the forums. However, for future articles I can focus more on spells, monsters or even rules advice if subscribers send in requests to [Pete.Nash@Ymail.Com](mailto:Pete.Nash@Ymail.Com)

- Pete Nash"

## VICTORY OR DEATH

"Today is a good day to die!"

- Crazy Horse, Battle of the Little Bighorn

Unlike many other games *RuneQuest* makes it clear that realism is at its core, rather than following a repetitive paradigm of kicking down the door, killing the monster and looting the room. In both real life and the game, a single stroke of a greatsword is likely to give an opponent a mortal blow, if not hew their head or leg clean off.

Whilst *RuneQuest* has several aspects which reduce the chance of fatalities in combat (as described later), the system itself encourages players to think of alternative solutions to problems facing them, rather than just slaughtering their way through foes. It embraces realism to emphasise the dangers of combat, and thereby augments roleplaying!

This might seem contradictory in terms of a RPG, especially one with a combat system suited to run genres which glorify sword wielding heroes... but weighing up the risks of drawing steel can be in itself an enjoyable decision for a character faced with hard choices.

Looking back to the origins of Historical Fantasy or Sword & Sorcery literature one sees that even the toughest protagonists think twice about unnecessary violence; utilising witty repartee to defuse a tense situation, stealth and cunning to bypass it, or simply fleeing combat if faced with unfavourable odds. Indeed it is rare for daredevils of

heroic fiction to bull their way through battle after battle, yet this is exactly what many player characters do. Why is this?

Part of the problem has been that role-playing games grew out of the War Gaming hobby, based upon rules which mimicked battlefield encounters. *RuneQuest* was one of the first games to embrace the concept of elements other than just violence, adding a diverse range of interesting skills and magics that catered to the socio-religious aspects of cultures.

The game however, still relied heavily on combat to resolve scenarios - thus it was hardly surprising that Game Masters allowed their characters to run riot in their campaigns without the world itself reacting to those actions. Partly this was due to the fun inherent in trying to keep a character alive (player character death was not such an issue in the old days), but there was also the fact that the rules themselves offered few options to defeat foes without simply killing them. A problem still endemic in many of today's RPGs where non-fatal combat is often more risky than a quick, clean death.

## JUDICIOUS USE OF COMBAT

"Force has no place where there is need of skill."

- Heroditus

Since combat is so central to the themes of adventure and fantasy, how does *RuneQuest 6* enact violent conflict without ending in sequential blood baths? After all, the excitement of a good battle is a fundamental part of most roleplaying games.

Well the most obvious method is that if a little fighting is needed to overcome a guard or repay an insult, then use Unarmed Combat rather than drawing weapons. A fist implicitly suggests the violence will not be fatal, whereas drawing a knife or a sword suggests otherwise. Brawls are the most commonplace method of settling differences in human culture, so embrace them!

Additionally *RuneQuest* has plenty of non-lethal techniques which can end a fight

without bloodshed at no inherent penalty. *Blind Opponent*, *Compel*, *Surrender*, *Disarm Opponent*, *Stun Location*, *Trip Opponent*, and *Withdraw* are examples of effects which can place a foe in an unwinnable situation or give characters the chance to run away. In many cases they can actually win a fight faster than if they try to kill their opponent!

Armour acts as damage reduction; invaluable to those expecting violent combat, which is why professional warriors throughout history have worn it. Hoarding Luck Points to force a Game Master to reroll or downgrade a Major Wound is another life saver - especially if the game setting frowns upon slaughtering a foe when they are down and helpless.

So whilst mechanically it is simple to run a low death game, the available non-lethal options have to be embraced by players... This in truth is where the core of the problem lies.

## CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE

"Oh! Come and see the violence inherent in the system! Help, help! I'm being repressed!"

- Monty Python and the Holy Grail

As role-playing games have increasingly developed towards social interaction, the use of unnecessary levels of violence has become difficult to cater for, creating a dichotomy between the traditional dungeon-bashing play style and a believable game setting. Something which has evolved with the increasing maturity of the hobby.

The fundamental heart of the matter is that in real life most people are uncomfortable with killing, fearing those that can kill with impunity, or whom have too much blood on their hands. Rather than treat such persons as idols to be praised, society will gradually distance themselves from them, even if they are heroes worthy of thanks. This can be seen in movies such as *Pale Rider*, tales such as *Njals Saga* or even the treatment of returning war veterans; yet rarely is it played out in a game setting.

Of course the circumstance of such violence plays a mitigating factor. Killing wild beasts and ravening monsters has no stigma attached to it. Fighting a battle or war in defence of one's family, tribe or nation is laudable. However assaulting and perhaps slaying a man for lying, stealing, or simply because they are annoying, rarely has any justification.

Some societies have rituals or traditions permitting combat under particular duress, such as defending one's honour by fighting a duel or defending oneself from accusation with trial by combat. Even here however, repetitive duelling or legal defence will still make you a person to be avoided; least you draw your associates into a spiralling cycle of vendetta.

## THE BENEFITS OF MERCY

"The question is do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?"

- Dirty Harry

Few Game Masters wish to deliberately persecute their players for acting in self defence or saving others, especially if they otherwise are not deliberately flouting the local law or authority. So it is as much the Game Master's responsibility to give their player characters a chance to solve problems and redress injustice without needing to resort to killing, as is the players' responsibility to not slaughter every belligerent NPC they meet.

However, there is one circumstance which is sometimes difficult to handle, that of players who face impending defeat. It is not unusual for characters to turn pig-headed, refusing to give up or surrender, even when faced with certain death. Although this can lead to epic last-stands, such situations can turn sour if the character dies, though it was their own stubbornness which killed them.

Of course the refusal to admit defeat might in part be due to the players believing that their Game Master might simply kill them once they are rendered helpless. Thus there needs to be trust between player and referee

that their character will be treated fairly, in a manner commiserate with the setting they are playing within.

Such setbacks should only be viewed as another step in the storyline, an opportunity to be exploited rather than an excuse for a helpless party to be murdered. This, after all, is the staple of literature or movie adventure - repeatedly defeated heroes either escaping, being released by an honourable captor or talking their way free.

Likewise showing mercy to an enemy should not be abused by the Game Master, so that an antagonist granted clemency immediately plucks up their weapon and mindlessly attacks again; instead they should act the part of a person offered a second chance; giving up their nefarious profession, plan some other perfidy, or feel the need to rebalance the debt of honour before continuing their feud.

Motivation is important here, thieves, bullies, jilted lovers, even justice seekers are unlikely to be seeking the life of the player characters. Most want something other than killing their victim, even though their confrontation descended into violence. When things backfire most want a quick way out and will probably never bother the party again.

## FEAR NOT THE WEAPON, BUT THE HAND THAT WIELDS IT

"Violence is my last option."

- Chuck Norris

In reality very few people fight to the death. In fact combat fatalities are often just an unfortunate side effect of fighting with weapons, than deliberate intent. On the other hand, hack and slash gaming is also great fun providing you are willing to accept the occasional character death as a consequence.

Since *RuneQuest* combat can handle both gaming styles with aplomb, the issue of how dangerous the system is, is more a question of roleplaying than mechanics. The game is as lethal as you and your players want it to be!