

# Foundations of Game Design

## Part I Personal Report — The Watchers TTRPG

---

Jean-Luc Portelli

February 3, 2014

### 1 INTRODUCTION

In this report I will outline and then detail my experiences over the span of the coursework, in reference to how the group work progressed, as well as my involvement in the required tasks.

### 2 BRAINSTORMING

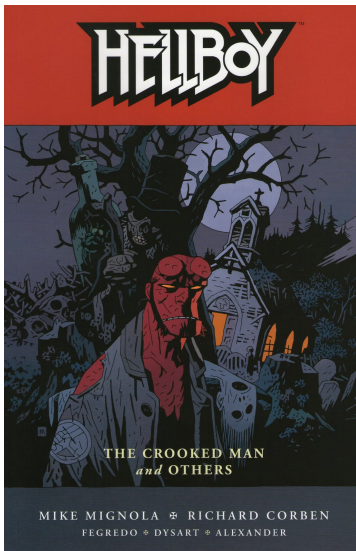


Figure 2.1: The Inspiration

When brainstorming for the initial concept for our TTRPG, we first considered the theme of the game we wanted to make. For this task we utilized mind-mapping, which we found less effective than the group-passing technique that we had previously made use of[2, pp. 153–154]. Initially, the ideas were extremely divergent, and we had trouble focusing on one congruent idea for a while. Eventually we decided to vote, and ended up choosing "supernatural investigation."

With that said, however, we found that there were several elements present in the other ideas we had discussed that we felt were still quite relevant. This led to us incorporating these ideas together into a more detailed concept, which gave rise to the setting that we decided to use for The Watchers. During discussions, we drew a lot of inspiration from the Hellboy universe[1], and found that it fit well within everybody's ideas for what the game should be.

Effectively, by disagreeing on having only one theme, we chose the main theme of the game's design; that of allowing plenty of flexibility, for the players to play it in their own way.

### 3 FIRST ITERATION DESIGN

With this concept as a starting point, the team started to discuss the concept with regards to gameplay style and direction.

It is relevant to note that within our team of four, two of us (including myself) are experienced with TTRPGs, while the other two were not, prior to this project. This gave a very interesting and valuable dynamic to the discussions since, while the experienced members spoke in terms of what one can or cannot do easily in a TTRPG, the others asked a lot of exploratory questions and tested the water in unusual directions.

One of the first decisions that was agreed upon was that the game's system should be simplistic. This simplicity was not intended to trivialize the game, but rather to create a much greater emphasis on the narrative aspect, which is predominant in games of this genre. In doing so it should cater both for new players, as well as those experienced in the improvisation and roleplay necessary for this style of gameplay. Especially given that the two of us experienced in TTRPGs were in favour of this direction, the team dynamic provided well for designing towards this requirement.

#### 3.1 CHALLENGE I: CHARACTER CREATION

One of the first problems we encountered when designing our game's system was that of a standardized method of creating characters. Given that we intended to allow players to make their own characters as flexibly as possible, this was a particularly complex problem to solve.

Early on, while researching different kinds of systems, we borrowed many ideas from the appropriately named Storytelling System from White Wolf, which provided a very straightforward method of building characters.

In order to facilitate our game's flexibility, one of the first aspects we decided would be good to have was to have stats that, while descriptive, should not be over-specialized. Over-specialization would restrict players' choices in their character creation process. As a starting point, we decided that the characters would only require three main stats; representing mental, physical, and social competences.

The next consideration was that of distinguishing factors between the characters. Since every character was meant to be unique, it made no sense to attempt quantifying each character's individual talents and powers ahead of time. Taking another page out of the Storytelling System, we provided a section for these abilities, but left the names of the abilities blank, so that the players may choose them as they wish.

With regards to abilities, we also considered the possibility that players create more mundane kinds of characters. Hence, we divided the abilities into two types; supernatural abilities, and skills. "Skills" referred specifically to those talents that could be obtained by anyone, given enough time.

Last, but not least, we discussed extensively the issue of balancing of characters. Given that the players can create any character that they wished, what would hold them back from

selecting extremely potent sets of abilities? In this regard, we eventually decided to include a section for drawbacks or weaknesses, referred to as "Side-effects," to be attributed to the characters, which we initially decided would be set at a required minimum amount.

### 3.2 CHALLENGE II: ACTION RESOLUTION

Another essential part of the game's design was that of action resolution. As an example, one of the most famous methods is the *D20* system, that incorporates a 20 sided die in every situation that the outcome of an action must be resolved fairly.

We decided on our main requirements for such a system. It had to be (a) easy to use and (b) detailed enough, but also offering enough ambiguity that it does not force a decision one way or the other. Over discussions, we considered using runic stones, dice, even tarot cards.

Drawing again from the Storytelling System, we settled on using a single D10 whenever an action needed to be resolved, at least for the sake of the first iteration of the design of the game. This would likely change after preliminary testing.

### 3.3 COMPLETING RULESET FOR GAMEPLAY

With the major pillars of the gameplay decided upon, we only needed to fill in the gaps of any extra rules that were necessary for our game.

Aside from the character creation and action resolution, we added a damage system for keeping track of a character's health as well as a more involving method of involving players in the storytelling that we called "charms."

Health would be simply measured on a three point scale, and should all three points be spent due to injury, the character would be incapacitated. Injury would also affect dice rolls.

Charms, on the other hand, were intended for use by players to have more influence on the game's narrative. These tokens, limited in supply, would allow players to change the course of the story by spending one, possibly avoiding a precarious situation.

The first prototype of the rulebook also explained the concept of initiative and turn order.

## 4 PLAY TESTING I

Once our first playable prototype had been designed, we set about playtesting it with people outside of our team.

In this phase, we managed to organize four separate playtest sessions, in which we involved players from broadly differing backgrounds and experience with TTRPGs. Amongst the participants, we had players whose experience ranged from being not at all experienced with traditional games (even board games) to those with over 10 years experience with TTRPGs. Playtesting was not focused on any one portion of the game, as opposed to recommendations to the contrary[2, pp. 265,268], because we felt that it would give a very incomplete view of our game and leave playtesters frustrated, and wanting more (we hoped).

Thankfully, the feedback we received was very positive, overall. The playtest sessions ran for approximately 3 and a half hours each, on average, and none of the players complained.

Aside from the positive response, however, we did receive some very valuable suggestions from our playtesters. Amongst all the comments we received, these were the most prevalent:

- Character sheets should be split into separate sheets for more space and detail
- Character creation still needs more guidance, examples and suggestions
- The game is immensely dependent on a good Game Master in order to succeed
- Character creation could use some more consideration towards balancing
- Lack of rules makes the game fun and easy, but it needs more guidance

Most important for us was that players were very much in favour of the prioritization of storytelling over number-crunching. The fact that none of the players were given access to the rules prior to play, and yet none of them felt overwhelmed by the gameplay, was very important for us to achieve.



Figure 4.1: Playtesting in Progress — Rapt Attention

With that said, however, the playtests all corroborated the dire need for more supporting content aimed towards the GM. Two of us, including myself, played the GMs in the different playtest groups, and in both cases we felt the need to fill in gaps where the rulebook did not provide sufficient information. We were comfortable doing so only thanks to our prior TTRPG experience, so it was clear that the game should provide more guiding content for those leading a session as the GM.

Following the extensive feedback that we received, we worked on the first update.

## 5 FIRST UPDATE AND PLAY TESTING II

After discussing our playtest results, we agreed that the game was not yet complete[2, pp. 279–280], and its rulebook was in need of further polish. The two most prevalent changes that we

made to the game were to do with the rulebook: adding supplementary content for the GM, as well as adjusting the skill and resolution systems of the game.

Further to the rulebook amendments, as per the feedback we received, we also updated our character sheets from one to four separate sheets serving different roles. We incorporated a sheet for the character's general information, a reference sheet for stats and abilities, a detailed information sheet for skills and abilities, as well as an inventory sheet.

## 5.1 EXPANSION OF THE RULEBOOK

At this stage of the game's development, we had a clear idea of where we were going, and what we wanted our game to be. The majority of the existing content of the rulebook was polished up to reflect these aims, while also adding to it a supplement intended for use by the GM.

This guidebook helps to explain the essential role of the GM to those new to the game, delineating a vast array of guidelines and suggestions to get them prepared for the game. The way the guidebook was designed was to walk the GM through every step of a single playthrough, and what they will need to do in order to keep the game going. Since we experienced a great need, as GMs, to improvise and discuss with our players throughout the playtest sessions, this guidebook needed to reflect those needs.

At the same time, we wanted to avoid restricting the players' options, especially after designing our game to provide as much freedom as possible—hence why this section was not intended as a *rulebook*, but a *guidebook*. Writing for this section was particularly interesting.

The content within the GM guidebook also relied on the updates we needed to make to the skill and resolution systems, which we worked on in tandem.

## 5.2 UPDATING THE SKILL AND RESOLUTION SYSTEMS

As well as the GM-related content, there were concerns that the skill creation system was far too shapeless; that there was too much freedom. This concern was related to balancing, as some players commented, where players might power-game their way through a session.

A quick new system was put together, in which the attributes of a power would be quantified to give each special ability a score. This score would measure the overall strength of the ability, which could be compared between characters.

Soon after, we held a quick playtest in order to see how the changes would work in practice, and immediately a number of problems surfaced—ironically, from the freedom that we were giving players. Effectively, the first set of abilities we attempted to measure were not only irrelevant to the new system, but some even contradicted how we intended to measure their strengths.

Personally, this revelation was a relief to me, as I was opposed to the idea. The playtest served as proof that allowing such a degree of freedom would be contrary to any attempts of measurement, and so we adopted the system which is now in the final version.

Effectively, the skill system now utilizes a system of keywords, with which the players would describe the abilities they want, and the GM may get a better grasp on what these powers can or cannot do, to pin them down precisely for everyone's understanding. As for balance

between players, we decided that this should be handled by the group playing the game itself, as the notion of "balance" can vary from player to player, let alone an entire group of people.

Further to updating the skill system, we also saw the need to change the method for action resolution. While the D10 system served well for a preliminary test, it often stalled gameplay while players and the GM tried to calculate exactly what the value rolled meant. While GMing, I actually found myself disregarding the exact value of the die more often than not, just to keep the game moving smoothly.

Since we still wanted to incorporate the factor of randomness and having "fate" at play, we did not want to remove all forms of randomization from the game. With the concept of "fate" in mind, we considered the use of fate dice: six sided dice that have the values +1, -1 and 0 on two sides each, respectively. These dice provided the perfect solution for our needs, because:

- They were easy to read
- They offered some form of randomization
- The randomization was very fairly distributed

In fact, on the subject of distribution, it was very interesting how the distribution of values in a fate die roll is affected, based on the number of fate dice you roll [2, p. 306]. Firstly, no matter how many dice you add, there will always be a balanced probability between getting a negative or a positive outcome. However, there is also much less chance of getting the minimum or maximum possible values.

For this reason we decided to use a 4DF system, i.e. 4 fudge/fate dice rolled at a time. This gave the perfect balance of deviation of results, while avoiding the need to stop and count the totals every time they are rolled. They also provide a very clear indication of what the result represents: negative values are a bad influence, while positive values are a good influence on the outcome of what is being done.

Thanks to this, action resolution is hence very straightforward to explain: easy actions are less vulnerable to influence, while tougher actions would be affected or prevented by a little negative influence—even possibly requiring some added luck to succeed at all. This suited our needs perfectly, and it was the system we ended up adopting for The Watchers in its final iteration.

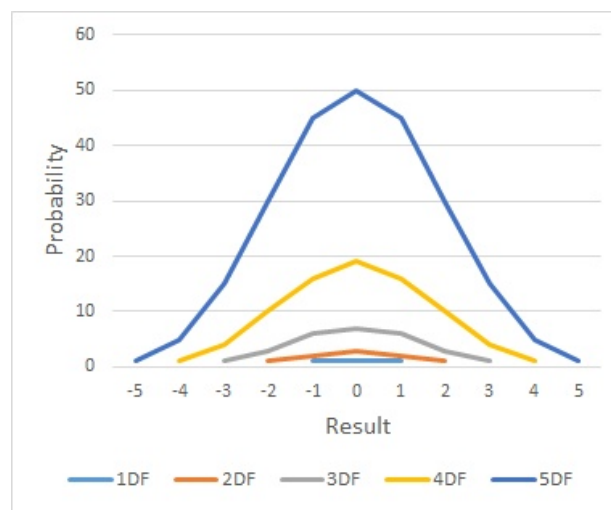


Figure 5.1: Result vs. Probability for Fudge Dice

## 6 FINAL TOUCHES AND PROTOTYPE CREATION

Once the rulebook was ready, we could print and bind it, as well as include any additional components necessary for playing the game. This was a fairly straightforward process, as there was only a small number of materials that needed preparing.

Unfortunately, the only components we could not obtain in a finished format were the dice, for which we improvised slightly using blank D6es. However, the game was deemed playable with the resources included.

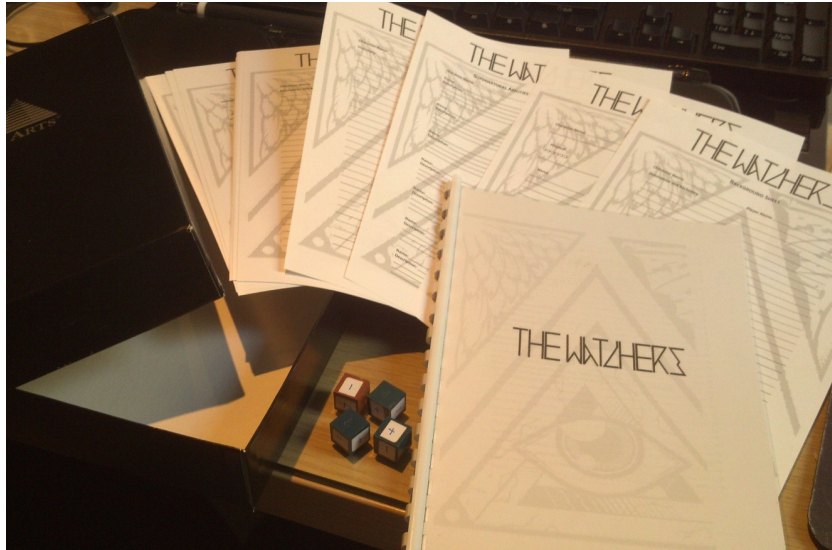


Figure 6.1: Final Prototype Showing Rulebook, Character Sheets and Fate/Fudge Dice

## 7 OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNT

With regards to the overall experience working on The Watchers with my team, it was largely positive. It was very fulfilling to experience the different aspects of working in a team, as well as being an interesting learning experience throughout.

To best explain the lessons and experiences I garnered from the entire process, it would be pertinent to discuss the notable highlights within the process previously discussed.

### 7.1 AVOIDING OVER-INVOLVEMENT

When our group was first formed, we worked on two other games prior to settling on the The Watchers. My involvement up until then had been very strong, and I constantly felt a need to add as much to the discussions and brainstorming processes as I could.

By the time we started working on The Watchers, I realized that I was being a bit too overbearing, so I took a step back and let the game develop on its own, only chipping in my two cents whenever it was needed. That having been said, however, it was extremely fulfilling to step in to work again, once we had a good idea of what needed to be done; writing consid-

erable chunks of the rulebook, editing and polishing up the writing and even helping in the design process of the rules themselves.

Had I been more insistent throughout the entire process, the game would have been very different to what it is now—and likely, not nearly as good.

## 7.2 DIVERGENT CONCEPTS

After we discussed the game's initial concepts, it was interesting how, even though we were designing the same game, the game's openness actually resulted in each of the team members having a different idea of how the game would be played. While this did not result in any adverse disagreements, it highlighted how important it is to emphasize clarity in communication, as well as the necessity of an accurate GDD even from the very start of development.

## 7.3 WRITING AN RPG

It was fairly insightful to realize just how much work goes into a TTRPG that players never see or touch upon; despite our hours of testing, discussion and deliberation, the actual artifact that resulted from all the work did not feel at all representative of the work put into it.

However, in this same sense it is relevant to note that, conversely, given that the game consists of very few components, the gameplay and storytelling that can emerge from it follows the same trend, but in reverse. Namely, a relatively small artifact can result in very big game experiences, as we saw first-hand during our playtests.

## 7.4 INTERNAL PLAYTEST FIRST

Before holding our first playtest session, we neglected to first run one within the team. Many suggestions that resulted from the playtests could have been spotted and fixed prior to demonstrating the game to external playtesters, possibly making room for more detailed suggestions on other topics.

## 7.5 WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, TEST

When re-working the character design process, there was a period of disagreement between myself and another member of the team with regards to how it would be best to approach the problem. Without being prompted, the other member drafted up a quick and simple system that he believed would work, which I disagreed with. During discussions, he suggested that we playtest it first, to see whether it will work or not, before we dismiss it entirely.

As would be expected, this approach proved to be the most conclusive way to establish whether the change would work or not. At that point, it was not about who was right or wrong, but simply what was best for the game. It was found to be an infeasible solution to the problem, which then gave way to the more freeform system, which is now used in *The Watchers*.



## 8 CONCLUSION

After all, I am proud of what we have managed to achieve as a group. The Watchers is a game that I am sure I will be playing myself time and time again. It does require further polishing; however, I am confident that it is still a fairly compelling and entertaining game as it is.

The experience, while quite involved, was extremely enlightening. It helped me learn a lot about my strengths while working in a healthy group dynamic, while designing and implementing something very interesting to me, but also, one that I never really expected to.

## REFERENCES

- [1] *Hellboy: The Crooked Man and Others*, January 2014.  
URL <http://tinyurl.com/owz3dg2>. Page Version ID: 552572586.
- [2] Tracy Fullerton. *Game design workshop: a playcentric approach to creating innovative games*. Taylor & Francis US, 2008.