

## NEO-OTYUGH INTERVIEW - Ron Edwards, July 2014.

This was promised for posting, but then the website went silent.

### 1. What's the most memorable feedback you gave to another game designer on their work?

I don't know if it's memorable on his part, but I think the one that sticks with me the most is the very first version of Burning Wheel, when Luke Crane participated at the Forge booth at GenCon in 2003. I loved his work and was excited by the drive and steely core he'd demonstrated in getting this thing made, and which is also evident in him personally, which you know if you've met him.

On one of the con evenings we had a kind of sit-down, what-we-think discussion, about a lot of games and things but mostly Burning Wheel. I told him about one page at the end of the book which made me hate the game. It was the part which said, "These rules are meant to fade away, until eventually you are playing without them."

Now, Burning Wheel is an exquisitely mechanics-focused role-playing game, perhaps the apex of design which seeks to unify the points, the dice-rolls, the categories, and the procedures into a true *engine* of play. Like my game Sorcerer and Jake Norwood's The Riddle of Steel (two games which share a lot with Burning Wheel and with each other, all independently written at about the same time), you don't roll dice in this game when you stop role-playing, you roll dice because it fuels role-playing, and in turn is fueled by it. The love and care for the mechanics is evident on every page.

So I asked him, "Do you believe that? This sentence, right here? After however many sessions, I'm supposed to be using these mechanics less and less as I go? And you want me to stop using them altogether, ultimately?"

Luke sighed a little. "No," he said. And he described a situation I'd seen before, many times actually, in which one of his friends apparently felt very strongly that "real" role-playing didn't use numbers or procedural mechanics like dice, and insisted that Luke put that into the book.

I said, "Screw your friend. It's evident you love these mechanics and use the hell out of them, and have playtested them to the point of mutual orgasm. You are not being honest with me as the reader and as a person who loves this very kind of design so very much! You're writing to people like me, not to him!"

The next printing was Burning Wheel Revised, and this time it was Luke's words, on every page, from Luke's mind and his love of his game.

### 2. A loud player is at your table and you are the GM. What do you do to make sure that the player doesn't dominate the game?

"Loud" and "dominating" aren't the same things. Let me rephrase your question so it makes more sense to me.

*i. A person at the table is interfering with others' ability to contribute, effectively demanding spotlight time for himself or herself and special attention to his or her character.*

Notice that I make no reference to player vs. GM. This is a problem no matter who is doing it. If you'd phrased it, "The GM at your table is loud and you are a player," where "loud" meant what I just said, "interfering with others' ability to contribute," then it's the very same problem.

*ii. No one else is speaking up about it and so far, the person is getting exactly what they want.*

Notice as well that I do not identify "the GM" with the role of social director and courtesy monitor. There's no reason why the person who has prepared the imagined situation should be solely responsible for playing that role, or even specially responsible for it in any way, or why anyone else would give up their personal agency about it.

iii. *What do you do so this isn't a total sink of misery?*

The solution is to call it out in the moment. "You are interrupting and you need to stop." "You just stomped all over Bob, who was trying to talk." "It is my turn to talk, not yours." As well, to back it up, when the person looks at you with disbelief or turns on the behavior again right away.

I'll tell you as well what will absolutely not work:

i. "Threaten or punish the character." *The wizard tells your character to mellow out or else, or the wizard turns your character into a statue.* Imagined components do not govern real people. I don't care how many rulebooks provide this advice; the person merely throws it back in your face that it's "unfair" and he or she is absolutely right. And this person knows damn well that all they have to do to get their way is hold the whole game hostage while they argue.

ii. "Communicate! Everything will be fine." *The GM tells the player to be a good citizen.* That particular role concerns who has certain rules-based jobs, or more specifically, certain game mechanics. I don't care how much gamer mythology positions this person as some kind of leader or boss - all it takes is for one person to dare them to do something about it to show how thin that is, and if "do something" is (i) above, then see its explanation. The person doesn't fear being excluded for one minute, because in this construction, only the single other person is challenging him or her, "your word against mine" while everyone else sits silent and woeful.

Real people are not governed by in-game fiction or rules categories like GM/player. All such talk has it completely inside out. Instead, all the real-people roles, game rules, and character roles are embedded in a real-world social scene, made of who these people are and why they're hanging out together. It includes everything imaginable about how people relate to one another, specific to this particular group at this particular time, whether they know it or not, or say it out loud or not.

Let me tell you the fundamentals of this thing, I'll call it "Social Contract" and I stress that it is mostly tacit and quite likely not ever fully grasped by the people who are doing it - but that as long as we're talking about people doing anything with each other, it's there. Anyway, as with most fun things people gather to do, the following have to be included for role-playing.

- i. They want to do something fun with one another, at this time, more than with anyone else they know.
- ii. They want to play this particular game as the "something," as opposed to any other game or activity (like watching a movie) they could be playing.

If these are happening, then everyone's responsible to take care of their own fun, and to expect that everyone else is happy to help with that. Also, it's everyone's responsibility to back up how this is getting done here, in other words, if someone is clearly unable to do this, they have to be faced with fully supported social disapproval.

You may have been in a role-playing group whose Social Contract didn't include those two things, or not very well. It's pretty likely the group ran into trouble, and maybe it never got articulated as a social thing and always tangled up in arguing about rules or imagined plausibility ("realism"). Now, it's true that rules and imagined plausibility aren't *nothing*, but it's also true that usually it's the Social Contract that's getting violated.

It's also a painful historical thing that role-playing culture often pretends that the Social Contract is automatically perfect because we're role-playing together, which isn't true. If you're interested in talking more about that, then check out the Geek Social Fallacies by Michael Suileabhain-Wilson (<http://www.plausiblydeniable.com/opinion/gsf.html>). Absolutely recommended.

**3. Otyughs are often used in dungeon settings. How would you shake that up?**

I haven't used one yet, nor in the days when I played characters exploring dungeons, did we ever encounter one. I am still an otyugh virgin. For me, the shake-up would be meeting one.

But maybe you're asking how otyughs can be *used* differently, if by "often" you mean "the same old way." If that's so, then consider ...

i. Keep an otyugh as a pet, especially for when you don't merely want to loot the dungeon, but to clear it and live there or otherwise use it. It's pretty messy and gross, right? Especially after massacring everything; those giant rat corpses and heaps of dead orcs aren't going to clean themselves up, you know. A well-treated, tamed otyugh would be just the ticket. Hell, you'd probably make more money hiring it out to surviving, successful adventurers than you would by going adventuring.

ii. Dungeons aren't the only stanky places around. How about the sewers under the huge fantasy city? I figure people brought home baby otyughs because they were so cute, but then they got big and started causing trouble, so down into the sewer they were dumped. And now, big fat mean city otyughs are lurking down there.

iii. Play the otyugh. Come on, you can!

iv. Otyugh sex! Could anything be so unmistakably sensual and lovely? See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHDI-Zv-0IO>, yeah, that's what I'm talking about. ... What, is there no romance in your soul? Well then, don't combine this option with #3 above.