

Immersionist fighter

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Wednesday, 26 September 2007

Remark : this article is a translation of the French article "Combattre en immersion" written by Gilles Cruyplants. This article is available in the French part of this website.

Introduction

This reflexion comes from a debate over the way fights are settled in Belgian larp events (and by extension, to a lesser extent, in France, Switzerland and Germany). The starting point was to deplore their lack of realism. Common rules reduced the practice of fight in larp to a simple sport in which the player couldn't keep playing the role.

Was it possible to truly play a character while fighting according to established simulation rules ?

Cinema quality fights

The lack of realism in these situations comes from the fact that players fight first of all with a "game" point of view. The role being eclipsed by the game, the people involved then turn into "gamers", for whom winning the fight is more important than playing their characters. Gone the role, long live the brawl. This is normal; a duel (or a fight) puts the participants in a situation of engagement and the usual reflex is to try to settle this engagement at all costs, by all available means (provided by the rules). Not to mention the Belgian situation, where being recognised as a good fighter praises the ego, which implies all the more a stronger urge to "win";.

To demonstrate this fact, one has just to consider the way the fight with fake swords developed in our regions. Actually, we observe a style of fight belonging to a 17th century fencer (swords weighted approximately 500 grams then) with an armour (if the rules deliver a significant advantage to it) coming from the 15th century. To put it simple, we are like panzers fighting with straws. This is due to common simulation rules, for which touching lightly means injuring. As a consequence, we can see the players trying to maximise their chances of victory by using the flaws purposely left in the combat system (e.g. not to take the inertia strength into account because of its dangerousness). So we are indeed in a situation where the game is seen in terms of benefit rather than role.

Limitations of the current systems

In my opinion, and because of the above mentioned reasons, it is impossible to avoid this kind of behaviour with the system of fight simulation that we all know in Belgium (life points / damage points / hit gently / etc.). We could take the German model as an example and try to make the rules more complex by refusing unrealistic combat moves (the strike must be clearly armed and given with might, fighters must march back after each blow, etc.). But then, new issues would arise (safety) and the average player is not culturally ready for such a change (then again, the average player is not ready for anything much).

That choice of style has a few positive consequences, being, among other things, to improve the quality of the fighter's protection outfit and to produce fights more in accordance to the equipment used.

Here I make a small digression to specify clearly that we are talking about traditional heroic fantasy fights. It is obvious that each style of play and atmosphere (evolution level of the equipment) should bear its proper rules to fit to the wanted style (heroic, renaissance, realistic, etc.)

The hybrid common narrative system

In the frame of a game that is supposed to be realistic, where the role (interpretation) overtakes the game, I recommend the "common narrative system". I am not going to explain it here in its entirety (it is quite long) but it is roughly a vision of larp where the player has as much influence on the game as does the organizer. I will try to apply this to the problem of combat, in its hybrid version (so-called transitional), for the complete version would require the exposition of the above mentioned system.

In the hybrid version, we are still talking about hit points and we take the simulation system as a basis to explain the game reality (axioms). Nevertheless, we keep the main idea of the system, which is to take a part of the responsibility for the scene outcome and to carry it over to the players. Thus we give them points of reference, without informing them on their characters' state, which no one but themselves can estimate (e.g. normality is the same as in our world, where we can die of one mighty stroke but can survive 4-5 weak blows. The difference with normality lies in the fact that some people/races can sustain up to 3 or 4 times more injuries than others). On top of that come the possible safety rules. It is up to the players to estimate where they stand compared to that basic postulate (one must also define the reality of armours and other indirect effects, such as spells, powers and more interactions of the same kind). So they are not given exact numbers regarding their hit points or the damage points of their weapons, but only the manner in which the reality of a fight occurs in the game world (diegesis). It is up to them to play their characters within this frame, and not anymore by using the rules at their best to stay alive.

So they hold their destinies in their very own hands, and that implies a responsibility that won't let them hide behind simulation rules again.

The application

The first reactions will cause all players to be matchless fighters, whose confrontations will last for hours, but the trend will soon go backwards, for defeating an enemy won't be challenging anymore. In fact, there won't be any interest to keep fighting after having endured twenty blows or more, for the only way of winning is to decide not to lose. Once this training is over, supported by a clear message of the organizers, the players will understand that the interest of a fight lies in playing the character, feeling emotions and going through the reality of the diegetic world. The immersion will be greater all the more and combat more lifelike. Then we will see fights that look true to life, where a mace blow makes an ennemy step back, where spears remain impaled under the opponents' arms, where weapons look heavy and where cries of pain rise from every corner for the greatest satisfaction of all these bloodthirsty people.

Hum...

Conclusion

More briefly, using this method, we displace the interest of combat from the game (winning a fight) to the role (being a

character in combat).

The same way that we already see in verbal jousts the wish of some people to create a sound and unselfish exchange at the inn (game of dramatist/narrativist), we will see the emergence of a new category of disinterested exchanges, the one of fights deprived of any stake or out of the game (extradiegetic) worries. It goes without saying that according to the player's point of view, a narrativist as well as an immersionist approach can occur when putting into practice the common narrative system described here. But defining a clear WYSIWYG combat system that allows immersion is not always simple, and the object of this reflexion could help you to find out other solutions than the traditional ones.

Remark :

The common narrative system is currently being written and more information will follow on that subject.