

GAME SYSTEM ROADMAP

This chart outlines a partial structure of RPG designs. It charts the interaction of a player's main input (the character) with the game's main engine (conflict resolution). Read the chart with the following assumptions:

1. This is descriptive, not prescriptive
2. The chart does not represent all RPGs
3. The chart represents only part of a whole game system.
4. Example games on the chart are not the only possible examples.

Also, note that individual game systems will not have every component present on the chart. For example, *Conspiracy of Shadows: Dirty Hands* has no "Attributes" as defined here, opting instead for a more widely distributed allotment of Descriptors, which are closer to "Traits / Skills" as defined here.

THIS CHART'S PURPOSE

This chart has two main functions:

1. First, I offer it as a general means and reference to discuss games, game play, and game design.
2. Second, the chart provides a road map and discussion framework for a team to design an open game design project I announced in May, 2010 at www.storiesyouplay.com.

CHARACTER CREATION

There are many ways to create characters. Each informs the components below, giving the player "ammo" for conflicts.

Examples:

- ♦ Life paths – *Burning Wheel*
- ♦ Group assignment – *Best Friends*
- ♦ Point builds – *The Riddle of Steel*
- ♦ Random + player choice – *D&D*
- ♦ Narrative keywords – *HeroQuest*
- ♦ Pre-generated – *Spirit of the Century*

MOTIVATORS

Character goals or emotional qualities that shape conflicts, affect their outcomes, and provide some mechanism for reward.

Examples:

- Keys – *The Shadow of Yesterday*
- Muses – *Nine Worlds*
- Beliefs – *Burning Wheel*

RELATIONSHIPS

The character's contacts, allies, friends, family, affiliations, etc. These may include individuals or groups.

Examples:

- Circles – *Burning Wheel*
- Followers – *HeroQuest*
- Contacts – *Exalted*

GEAR

Material tools, weapons, and other resources characters can use for benefit during conflict and play.

Examples:

- Weapons and armor – *Many!*
- Resources – *Burning Wheel*
- Items – *Trollbabe*

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

During play, the character changes, both gaining and losing conflict effectiveness, through role-playing.

Examples:

- ♦ Character acquires gear
- ♦ Character expands relationships
- ♦ Character earns fame or influence
- ♦ Character organizes a faction
- ♦ Character learns supernatural talent
- ♦ Character now seeks revenge

ATTRIBUTES

The few primary, innate abilities shared by all player characters, possibly by all NPCs as well.

Examples:

- Strength – *D&D*
- Self-Loathing – *My Life With Master*
- Lore – *Sorcerer*

TRAITS / SKILLS

Abilities and qualities that only some characters possess. Each trait / skill is mechanically similar to others, though relevant in different fictional contexts.

Examples

- Skills – *Many!*
- Aspects – *Spirit of the Century*
- Past & Present – *Dust Devils*

SPECIAL ABILITIES

Abilities that allow characters to exceed or contramand game rules for benefit. These abilities may also work in dissimilar ways from one another.

Examples:

- Secrets – *The Shadow of Yesterday*
- Edges – *Savage Worlds*
- Spells – *D&D*

REWARD LOOP

Mechanical rewards for using and/or completing character motivators. The rewards can earn "XP," modify or add motivators, or become currency to affect conflict outcomes.

Many games require that such mechanical rewards trigger only in the context of fictional resolution (e.g. when a character completes one of his or her goals).

Examples:

- XP – *The Shadow of Yesterday*
- Pride & Valor – *Nine Worlds*
- Artha – *Burning Wheel*

MECHANICAL CONSEQUENCES

Temporary modifiers resulting from conflict outcomes. These modify character effectiveness positively, though more often negatively. They can be universally applied, or relevant only in fictional contexts.

Examples

- Damage – *Many!*
- Fallout – *Dogs in the Vineyard*
- Conditions – *Mouseguard*

CONFLICT!

First, players must declare intentions that begin a conflict. These arise from fictional situations and role-playing.

PREPARATION

Once conflict's identified, players turn to their character's various resources to affect outcomes. This may include temporary effects from previous conflicts.

RESOLUTION MECHANIC

The mechanism to determine outcomes. (Note, the resolution mechanic is not "conflict resolution," but rather one component of conflict resolution.)

Examples:

- Simple die roll, variable target numbers – *D&D 3.0, 3.5, & 4E.*
- Die pools, fixed target numbers – *Burning Wheel*
- Dice pools, variable target numbers – *Reign*
- Opposed dice pools, compare highest value – *Sorcerer*
- Variable dice, fixed target number – *Savage Worlds*
- Opposed rolls – *Conspiracy of Shadows*
- Zero-average roll, shifts character ratings – *The Shadow of Yesterday*
- "Diceless" resolution – *Polaris*

RE-ROLLS / EXTENSIONS

Optional mechanisms to lengthen, expand, or continue conflicts. These can shift between "simple" or "complex" conflicts, allow players to attempt victory following a lost outcome, or "zoom in" on particular scenes.

Examples:

- Re-rolls – *Trollbabe*
- Bringing Down the Pain – *The Shadow of Yesterday*
- Extended conflicts – *HeroQuest*

OUTCOMES

Conflict outcomes resolve fictional situations (and likely set up new situations). These often have mechanical consequences for participants. And, outcomes also fuel game rewards, giving players mechanical benefits informed by the fictional events. Importantly, play continues, and more conflicts arise.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

INTENT

Players declare their characters' aims.

INITIATION

Players decide and explain how their characters will face the fictional crisis.

EXECUTION

Players employ the game system, including components from the player characters various abilities and qualities to figure out what happens.

EFFECT

Once players agree, the outcome becomes part of the game's fiction.

FICTIONAL OUTCOMES

The "in game" results of the conflict. Characters make their mark on the game and its "world" through conflict outcomes. The player changes both the game world and his or her character through play. As characters change, they acquire new means to affect future conflicts.