

ASCII @HACK!

An RPG that simulates roguelike game play, but using player empowerment, resource allocation, bidding, and instantiation to create the “random” adventuring zones for a single PC.

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Ralph Mazza & Mike Holmes - Tokens as narrative currency; Objections.

D. Vincent Baker - Freeform, flexible Trait dice.

Eric Provost - Freeform Zone creation.

Rogue, NetHack, ToME - Inspiration.

David Cherryholmes - General discussion and idea development.

“JoyWriter” - Helping me to the insight of using hidden bidding for Device instantiation.

Players

There is no GM, only players.

Determine who will be the player that will control the Adventurer and that will create the Adventurer’s Talents and Gear.

All other players are the Opposition: they create Zones—dungeons, forests, temple chambers, castles—and create and portray Obstacles—monsters, traps, environs, and puzzles in Zones.

In essence, *ASCII @HACK!* is a competitive game between the Adventurer player and the Opposition player(s). Furthermore, the Opposition players are in competition with each other to be the one whose Obstacle finally kills the Adventurer. As such, there will be times when the Opposition players actively resist each other (or, at the least, do not cooperate in supporting each other) in order to hold off Adventurer death until their own Obstacle can be brought to bear.

Setup

Prior to actual play, the players must get together the tools they will use in play (Tokens and dice) and must create the game world.

Tokens

Each player receives 20 Tokens to start the game. These Tokens represent quanta of narrative control to instantiate Elements: Talents, Gear, Obstacles, and Zones.

The physical representation of Tokens may be coins, poker chips, glass beads, pebbles, or whatever other small, common object fits the tone and mood of the game world (or whatever is available).

World Elements

Creation

To begin play, each player—starting with the Adventurer—spends one Token to state an Element about the World.

A World Element could any one of these:

- State the genre of the setting: fantasy, sci fi, western.
- State something about the tone of the game: humorous, serious, doomed.
- Set standards for the group's interaction at the table: forbidding out-of-game chatter, no cell phones, no profanity.

Objections

If another player objects to a proposed Element—or to anything declared throughout play (for example, an invoked Trait)—that player must pay a Token to oppose the Token spent by the player that is stating the Element.

If the stating player really wants the Element, then that player must choose a number of Tokens, hide them in his or her *right* hand, then put them forward.

Without any further communication or coordination, all other players do the same with their own Tokens, hiding a chosen number in one hand and putting it forward (one may choose to put forward no Tokens).

- If a player puts forward Tokens in his or her *right* hand, those Tokens are counted *in favor* of the stated Element.
- If a player puts forward Tokens in his or her *left* hand, those Tokens are counted *against* the stated Element.

All players simultaneously reveal their hidden Tokens; the side with the most total Tokens wins the vote, with a tie going to the player that is stating the new Element (or invoking the Trait).

All paid and bid Tokens are lost by all players.

This hidden-bid process forms the core conflict mechanic of the entire game; all inter-player conflicts over narration are resolved with this process.

Completion

Players continue to take turns stating Elements until they either run out of Tokens or no longer wish to provide World Elements. Each player keeps any of his or her leftover Tokens after all players have finished stating World Elements.

Power Level

The players determine how many Tokens are refreshed after the Adventurer completes a Zone, using this chart:

Power Level	Adventurer Refresh / Escalation Bonus	Opposition Refresh	Opposition Escalation Bonus
Low	3 / +1	10 / # of Opposition Players	+3 total
Medium	5 / +3	15 / # of Opposition Players	+5 total
High	10 / +5	30 / # of Opposition Players	+10 total

A low power level will result in a game with minimal Adventurer advancement and will require significant Opposition coordination to provide a challenge to the Adventurer.

A high power level will result in a more powerful Adventurer that's strapped with great Gear and will free up Opposition to work at odds with each other, should they so desire.

Home Prep

Every Adventurer has a Home, which could be a town, the local lord's castle, a monastery, or even a crashed spacecraft.

Whatever form the Home takes, it is a safe area in which the Adventurer may buy Gear or train Talents, with one restriction: Gear that is acquired at Home may never have a die value greater than d8.

Adventurer Prep

Refresh the Adventurer player with the agreed-upon number of Tokens.

The Adventurer player then spends as many Tokens as desired, to instantiate Talents or Gear and assign them a die value according to these costs:

Talent/Environ Cost	Gear/Trap Cost	Die Value	Probabilities
1	1	d4	25% Success 25% Failure
2	2	d6	50% Success 17% Failure
4	3	d8	63% Success 13% Failure
8	5	d10	70% Success 10% Failure
16	8	d12	75% Success 08% Failure
32	13	d20	80% Success 05% Failure

Note that, because the Adventurer begins the game at Home, no starting Gear may have a die value greater than d8.

Talents are anything which is inherent to the Adventurer. Appropriate Talents include, but are not limited to, these types of Elements:

- Archery, melee, wizardry
- Nimble, strong, wise
- Aimed shot, disarm, fire blast

Gear is anything which the Adventurer carries that provides efficacy (not to be confused with Consumables below). Appropriate Gear includes, but is not limited to, these types of Elements:

- Fine bow, broadsword, quarterstaff
- Leather jerkin, chain shirt, enchanted robes
- Poison, potions of strength, manna stones

The die value of Talents or Gear will generally indicate its magnitude or quality, though it ultimately will always come down to the roll.

Inventory Limits

The Adventurer may never carry more than ten pieces of Gear.

Any time that the Adventurer is at Home, it may put Gear in the Home Bank and it may get Gear from that Home Bank.

Consumables

Consumables comes in two forms: Sustenance and Illumination. Set two, different-colored d20 dice to 20, one for Sustenance and one for Illumination.

Every time the Adventurer enters a new Zone, reduce the Sustenance die by 1. If the Sustenance die reaches 0 then, every time the Adventurer enters a new Zone, the Adventurer player must choose one Talent die to reduce by a single die rank (i.e. a d8 becomes a d6).

Every time the Adventurer enters a new Zone, if any of the Opposition players spends a Token, that Zone requires Illumination: reduce the Illumination die by 1. If the Illumination die reaches 0 then, every time the Adventurer enters a new Zone in which an Opposition player has spent a Token to require Illumination, the Adventurer treats all Talent or Gear as if it is d4.

The Consumable dice can increase during play, for various reasons and by various means (see Exploration below).

Escalation

Escalation represents going to “lower levels” of a “dungeon” or generally ramping up the challenge level to reach the end game.

Set a d10 to 1 and give it to the Adventurer player.

Whenever the Adventurer begins to exit a Zone, its player may elect to Escalate. The player increments the Escalation die and hands it to the Opposition; and the Adventurer’s Refresh increases by the amount indicated by the power level of the game.

When the Opposition has the Escalation die, they also may elect to Escalate whenever the Adventurer begins to exit a Zone. As above, they increment the die and hand it back to the Adventurer; and the Opposition’s Refresh increases by the amount indicated by the power level of the game.

Zone Creation

First Zone

The Adventurer player always gets to declare the nature of the first Zone that he or she is going to explore (but not its Obstacles). The Opposition is encouraged, during Home creation, to suggest some “local troubles” or other hooks to help the Adventurer player choose a style of Zone which everyone will enjoy creating and engaging. The first Zone is, basically, a signal to the rest of the players as to what kind of exploration or conflicts will interest the Adventurer player.

Quest Zones

Whenever the Adventurer is at Home, the Adventurer player may create a Quest, which is a special Zone (or series of Zones) in which the Adventurer player is able to define part of the Zone and Obstacles.

Every Quest has the same basic Goal: the Adventurer will visit every Zone and will defeat every Obstacle that its player defines in the Quest. No additional Zones or Obstacles that the Opposition adds to the Quest are required, though they could provide complications or barriers to completing the Quest Goal. If the Opposition adds to or increases the Traits or Gear of the Obstacles that the Adventurer player created, then the Adventurer still must visit every Zone and defeat all of those Obstacles. Quests which begin as trivial runs can be made into much tougher, long-term grinds.

Every two Tokens that the Adventurer player spends to establish an Illumination requirement for the Zone(s) or to create Obstacles in the Zone(s) is worth a single Token when the Adventurer returns Home after completing the Quest (in addition to whatever Tokens the Adventurer earns for surmounting Obstacles during the Quest). For example, if the Adventurer player spends 15 Tokens defining a Quest, when the Adventurer returns Home after completing the Quest, its player receives 8 Tokens. Thus, the Adventurer player is able to dictate aspects of the encounters for a Quest in exchange for what amounts to a savings for the Opposition, who can then use Tokens to increase the difficulty or expand the nature of the Obstacles.

Obstacles

After the First Zone, the Opposition takes the reins and provides all further Obstacles (except those the Adventurer player defines in Quest Zones):

Monsters

Created exactly like the Adventurer, monsters can be anything the Opposition imagines as an active entity trying to harm the Adventurer. See “Combat,” below, for details about how to resolve encounters with Monsters.

Traps

A trap is a Trait applied to the Zone itself, but whose dice can only be rolled if the Adventurer takes an action which triggers the trap; basically, a passive entity which will only harm the Adventurer under certain conditions.

The Opposition spends Tokens to both define the effects of the trap and the triggers: the effectiveness of the trap costs the same as if it were Adventurer Gear; and each trigger costs 1 Token.

When triggered (i.e. the Adventurer interacts with the Trap trigger), the Trap gets its die (or dice) and immediately rolls against the Adventurer, as in “Combat” below. The Trap, however, does not continue to fight like a Monster would; it can only be triggered by the Adventurer player’s narration of interaction with it.

To remove a Trap, the Adventurer player must invoke appropriate Talent and Gear dice and get enough net Successes to reduce the Trap’s die (or dice) to d4, at which point it is neutralized and the trigger may be used as normal in Exploration (see below).

Enviorns

Enviorns are a special case of traps which, basically, are considered to be automatically triggered upon entering the Zone. As such, the detrimental nature of the environ costs the same as if it were an Adventurer Talent.

Each Environ effect is only activated once per Zone entry, but they are activated *every* time the Adventurer enters the Zone. Normally, Environ effects can not be disabled, though a particularly clever use of Elements could remove them (with no Objections, of course).

Puzzles

A puzzle can come in two forms: a simple puzzle is a cost in Tokens for the Adventurer to pass into the next Zone; a logic puzzle is devised by the Opposition and provides Tokens to the Adventurer if solved, the amount of which is negotiated between all players after the logic puzzle is revealed.

A simple puzzle costs 1 Token per Token cost to bypass it; a logic puzzle costs nothing, but the Adventurer may ignore it with no penalties.

Description

The Opposition describes what the Adventurer sees upon entering the Zone, taking into account Illumination (i.e. if it is required and whether the Illumination die is at 0). This description can be embellished with all manner of detail, but only that which is bought with Tokens will have any mechanical effect.

Exits

The last step for the Opposition is to determine how many exits there are from the Zone.

The exits may have colorful descriptions or might just be branching paths in a maze; and it is common for each Zone to have a logical flow to its exits (and next Zones).

A Zone always has one exit (its entrance), barring some nefarious trap. The Adventurer may create an exit by spending 1 Token and narrating how his Talents and Gear would help to generate a new path to (an)other Zone(s) (e.g. Pickaxe d10 or Find Secrets d12). Each approved invocation of an Element earns the Adventurer its dice; every roll of 4 or higher on those dice creates a new Exit. The Opposition and Adventurer then bid Tokens to declare into which Zone the exit opens: either a new Zone or a specific previous one. High bid wins and ties go to the Adventurer (as is always true, after World Element creation).

Returning Home

To return Home, the Adventurer must move through any intervening Zones. Note that a Zone that was “clear” the last time it was visited might have all-new Obstacles in place, awaiting a staggering and desperate Adventurer (i.e. if the Opposition decides to spend Tokens).

As stated above, Home is a place to safely buy, rather than “find,” Gear (up to d8 only) or train Talents.

Home provides a further significant benefit to the Adventurer: Tokens that the Adventurer bids to increase the Consumables dice are worth *triple* their value, as compared to Opposition Tokens. It’s just-plain easier to find lamp oil and good eats at Home.

Exploration

Once an Adventurer has entered a Zone and it has been described, exploration begins.

The Adventurer player can begin to declare Elements (usually beneficial) that exist in the Zone, and where he or she finds them amongst the features described by the Opposition (often, this is a Trap trigger). If the Adventurer player narrates finding something useful, it's the same as if he or she bought it as Gear during creation or at Home (but with no d8 limit).

Additionally, the Adventurer player may choose to increase the Sustainance or Illumination die by any amount that he or she wants; the amount must be stated prior to changing the Consumables dice, and any Objection leads to a hidden bid (as always).

Further, the Adventurer player may pay one Token to find a Device—an item of Gear which would not logically get a die rank because it represents a non-quantitative effect. For example, the Adventurer might pay one Token for a “Scroll of Recall”—a Device which returns the Adventurer to Home without having to travel through the intervening Zones. As with World Creation, should any other player Object, that player pays a Token to start a hidden bid.

Of course, if there is a monster, it is very likely to attack the Adventurer long before he or she would have a chance to find any Gear, which means that the action in the Zone starts not with exploration but with...

Combat

Combat with a monster is broken up into rounds, during which range is set, Talents and Gear are invoked, and dice are rolled to see which side of the exchange wins the round.

Range

Combat begins at Far range, which permits the use of ranged Talents and Gear without penalty. Close-combat Talents, obviously, may not be invoked if at Far range.

To change ranges from Far to Near cost 1 Token, and vice versa. This change can happen repeatedly at the start of a given round (i.e. setting range does not use the usual bidding resolution).

Once everyone agrees to a particular range for the round (by not spending any more Tokens to change it), then that is the range until after the resolution roll (the Pitch, below).

Wind-Up

The Adventurer and whichever Opposition player is portraying the monster then take turns invoking Traits appropriate to the conflict, environs, Illumination, and any extenuating narrative circumstances.

If the Adventurer or monster tries to invoke ranged Talents or Gear at Near range, they are worth half their die value, rounded to the nearest whole die value (e.g. a d10 or d6 becomes a d4). Note that, because a “d2” could not ever roll a 4, d4 ranged Talents and Gear are useless at Near range.

Each side also may buy Stunt dice with Tokens, which costs a third of what they would cost if bought as Adventurer Gear (minimum of 1 Token). Stunt die invocation should be narrated during the course of other invocations, though it could also be a *coup de grace* move or a parting shot depending upon the circumstances of the narration up to this point. Once rolled, Stunt dice are lost forever (unlike Talents and Gear, which are only lost by die type reductions; see below).

If any player disagrees with an invocation, that player may Object by spending a Token. If the invoking player wants to insist on the invocation then that player must spend a Token, which then starts the normal hidden-bid resolution process (ties go to the Adventurer, as always).

Pitch

Finally, both sides roll all of their invoked dice. Every roll equal to or greater than 4 counts as a Success for that side. Every roll equal to 1 is a Failure, which reduces the number of Successes for that side by one. You can have zero or negative Successes, if the number of 1 rolls equals or exceeds the number of 4+ rolls.

The difference between the number of Successes for each side determines these two things:

- How many of the loser's Trait or Gear dice that the winner may reduce, one die rank from one Element per Success.
- The loser, who gets to narrate the resulting reductions in a manner which engages the invoked Talents, Gear, and Stunts of each side.

Note that this does mean that one side could have more Successes than it rolled, if the other side had negative Successes. For example, suppose that the Adventurer rolls 5 Successes with no Failures and that the monster rolls 2 Success and 4 Failures. The Adventurer then has $(5 - (2 - 4)) = (5 - (-2)) = (5 + 2) = 7$ Successes.

Wind-Down

If one side of the conflict no longer has any Traits over d4, it is Dead. If it is the Adventurer... good game; try again. If it is the monster then it may now be used in the Exploration stage to provide narrative justification for new Gear or for increasing the Sustenance or Illumination dice. Also, the Adventurer receives half the Tokens (rounded up) that the Opposition spent to create the monster's Traits and Gear.

If both sides still have Traits then the combat continues, unless one side Escapes.

To Escape, that side has to bid Tokens, which might be opposed by the other side: start by spending 1 Token, then proceed to a hidden bid if the other side spends 1 Token. If the side trying to Escape wins the hidden bid, it relocates to a Zone connected to the current Zone. If it is a monster then, every time the Adventurer enters a new Zone, one of its Traits (but not Gear) is restored by one die rank, up to its original starting rank.

Refreshes

As the Adventurer exits a Zone, all players receive refresh Tokens equal to the value determined by the chosen Power Level for the game.

Note that the Opposition is not refreshed during World Creation or prior to or during the first Zone; this is the minor mechanical edge with which the Adventurer begins play.

Advancement

As Tokens pile up on the side of the Opposition, the Adventurer is going to want to upgrade his or her Talent die ranks or add new Talents or Gear.

Within a Zone, the Adventurer may spend Tokens to restore Traits or Gear (“healing” or “repairing” them much like gaining new Gear through exploration). A piece of Gear, however, *may never* exceed its original starting rank, unless it is narrated in some way that delights everyone in the game. Traits may be upgraded at will.

To restore or increase the rank of Gear or Traits, spend Tokens equal to the difference in prices between the two die ranks (e.g. to restore or increase a Talent from d8 to d10 costs 2 Tokens).

Adventurer Victory

When the Escalation die reaches 10, the *very next* Zone is the Final Zone. As such, the Adventurer player should spend all Tokens possible, only holding back a few for Stunts.

Similarly, the Opposition should spend every remaining Token on the Final Zones Obstacles; it is traditional for one of those to be some kind of “final boss monster.” Because there is no exit from the Final Zone (other than the entrance, of course), the Opposition may not create a Puzzle; similarly, because the Adventurer will not do any further Exploration, there is little reason to create Traps. Environs, however, are common and utterly appropriate.

If the Adventurer clears the Final Zone, it and its player has won the game, defeating the Opposition.

Feedback Requests

- PLEASE playtest; full name (or handle), front-matter credit to anyone who provides solid feedback (i.e. I can use it or it effects a rule change)
- How is the Token economy working out?
 - Do you find the game better if it is more lethal, like “traditional” roguelike games? Put differently, is it “OK” for the game to kill an Adventurer in, say, five times the amount of time it took to setup the World, Home, and Adventurer (e.g. 10 minutes of setup yielding “only” an hour-long game)?
 - Should the core rules actually ramp up that ratio? For example: the Refresh starts at Ad5 and Opps15, but the Opps’ increases by 1 every time that the Ad returns Home?
- How might I handle “vulnerability” or “scoped” elements, like a Sword of Flames which is more effective against monsters vulnerable to fire?
 - The only bonus I can imagine is either (a) a die type shift up the chart or (b) a +1 or +2 to the roll on the Gear or Trait’s die. +2 to the roll is VERY big bonus—only a 1 fails!
 - What should such a bonus cost? It’s some kind of “tag” on the Gear or Trait, which is of limited utility (in fact, the Opposition could just avoid that vulnerability forevermore!), so it shouldn’t cost much. But a die shift can be worth upwards of 16 Tokens (a Trait going from d12 to d20).
 - Conversely, how much Token savings would an Obstacle enjoy, if it took on a vulnerability? What’s to prevent a ton of “free Tokens” for the Opposition, if they start to define vulnerabilities that are “safe” for the Adventurer’s currently scoped effects?
- What didn’t you “get” or what was the one most difficult aspect of play based on the rules as written?