

CAMPAIGNS MADE EASY: Role-Playing and Matrix Games

By Chris Engle



We share a common interest. We play role playing games. We've spent many hours over the last twenty years in this wonderful pursuit and our lives have been greatly enriched by the fellowship of the hobby. So, why is it that game makers keep tinkering with the rules?

It's simple really. The rules aren't perfect. There are situations in role playing games where the rules just don't handle things well. When a campaign gets caught in one of these situations, it can be in trouble. Consider the following scenarios;

- A game master begins the adventure in a city. There are 5 players in the game (a good manageable party). Suddenly, everyone wants to do something different. The Thief wants to join the local guild. The Magic User wants to find a library. The Fighters want to visit the magic-toy shop and the Cleric wants to minister to the poor. The GM is swamped. If he tries to role play each one of these "non-adventure" events, the entire game session will be used up in 'boring' (i.e. non-adventurous), but important, play. The game is lost in an avalanche of minor details.

The normal solution to this problem is to ignore the minor stuff and gloss over time consuming role plays. Of course, this often backfires when a player is accidentally given a minor, but powerful job or magic item. The GM, of course, is forced to take it away from him, which brings on cries of protest from everyone. This is bad, but consider the next example.

- A GM spends days writing a new "Adventure" for the party. It is filled with up to 100 enemies, each complete with a life story. Detailed maps cover every possible place in the playing area. And so, the game begins. Almost immediately the players begin asking questions that the GM had not considered! The GM is forced to improvise, which can easily throw off many of the wonderful little pre-planned encounters. The GM can steer the adventurers back to the "script" with an iron hand, but few players like to be treated in such a manner. A more daring GM, well versed in story telling and lies, can make it up as he goes along. Either way, the GM has the largest burden of work. If he gets tired, the game suffers.

A common solution to this problem is to tightly script what can happen in the game. The GM becomes God, provider of ALL information. If a player's question does not fit in with the script, he is ignored. The problem is that the players become helpless to change the world. Is it any wonder then that they soon long for a good fight? At least in combat they have the power to affect the world.

One can see why GMs continue to seek ways to correct these problems. If a rules change can help, then more power to it. There are probably hundreds of ways to improve the situation. I have found one way around the problems that I feel works very well.

THE MATRIX GAME

If you play RPGs, you have probably seen the following happen in a game. One player says, "I visit the high priest and convince him to loan me the +5 Holy Sword." To which the GM says, "Yeah, you visit him, but he tells you to stick it in your ear." This ends the exchange. The GM has all the power. Often times though, a player will not let it drop. He goes on to give reasons why he should be given the Sword. "I

am a Paladin. He knows that I am going to use it to kill the Dragon God and he knows that I NEVER tell a lie!" Sometimes this works and the GM relents. Without knowing it, the player and GM have just used the principles behind the Matrix Game.

Matrix Games are a method for using arguments to describe and resolve non-adventure events. They are very simple to run. To begin the process, a player makes a 3 part argument that tells an action he wants to happen, the result that comes about because of that action and a list of reasons as to why events should occur in this manner. This is basically what is already happening in many games as described in our situation above. The only difference is that Matrix Games add structure and a die roll to resolving such arguments.

The Rules

After each role playing session, the players get experience points according to the traditional method for advancing characters. When Matrix Game Rules are being used in an RPG, the players are also allowed to make 2 arguments to advance their characters. One of the arguments must be used for social development. The other argument can be used either for making social contacts or to improve the character's abilities (like learning a new skill or spell).

In a Matrix Game, arguments are clearly structured. A legal argument must be comprised of the following elements:

- **Action:** Something the character is going to do.
- **Result:** What happens when the action is completed.
- **Reasons:** Three short statements that support the action/result equation.

There are no limitations on what a player can attempt with an argument, as long as it follows the above format. You will find that such freedom for your players will generate creative, original arguments that enhance the RPG campaign.

Actions and Results are decided on by the player, but the Three Reasons are a different matter.

Reasons come from a list of short descriptive phrases that describe the world. This list is called a "Matrix", thus the term, "Matrix Game". Below is an example of what a matrix might look like:

- Great Magic
- Magic Beasts
- Buy Things in the Market
- Self Preservation
- Guilt by Association
- Anger
- Fear
- The King Defends the Realm
- etc.

The purpose of the matrix is to describe the world to the players. It is NEVER a complete description of the world. It usually suggests many more descriptive phrases that could be in it. Most players know a lot about how the world works, especially players of a D&D campaign.

In the Matrix Game, a player could support an argument with reasons he has made up which he believes SHOULD be in the matrix. If the GM does not veto the reason, it becomes part of the matrix and supports the argument.

Arguments are resolved by a roll of 1d6. If an argument has three reasons and generally seems reasonable, it has a 50% chance of happening. The player rolls a die. If the roll is 3 or less, the argument wins. The result becomes part of the matrix and the player can use anything he has gained. If an argument only has 2 reasons supporting it, the roll must be 2 or less to win. Resolving arguments using the Matrix Game is as simple as that.

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

Once the player has presented his argument (complete with an Action, Result and Three Reasons), the GM may choose to present a *counter-argument* to the player's argument. This in effect is another argument that bounces off the first argument. The GM can say "Yes your action/result happens and a second result also happens." Or he could say, "Yes,

your action happens, but the result is different." He might also say, "No your action/result does not happen. Actually, this different action/result equation takes place." The following table lists the various formats for a counter-argument:

Table: Counter-Argument Formats

YES (the player's action takes place) AND (a second result occurs)
 YES (the player's action takes place) BUT (a different result occurs)
 NO (the player's action/result does not take place) ACTUALLY (a different action/result occurs)

When the GM makes a counter-argument, resolution is handled a little differently.

- Counter arguments are also supported by three reasons.
- YES AND arguments win on a 4 or less
- YES BUT arguments win on a 3 or less
- NO, ACTUALLY arguments win on a 2 or less.

When a counter-argument is made, one of the two results proposed must actually occur. An unopposed argument must win on it's roll of the die or nothing occurs.

After the GM has presented his counter-argument, the GM and player roll for their own respective arguments. The rolling continues until one of the arguments, either the initial argument or the counter-argument, has won. If both arguments win or both lose, then continue to roll the die.

The GM can decide that a player's argument is either STRONG or WEAK. This is a judgement call based on how much build-up a player has been doing to prepare for this event. If it is strong, modify the roll needed to win by +1. If it is weak, modify the roll by -1.

Lastly, the GM may decide that a player's argument is just plain STUPID or simply too much. If this is the case, the GM can simply *Veto* the argument, no roll needed. After all, the GM must have the final say in his own game. The power to veto allows the GM to retain control and keep things from getting out of hand. However, if he chooses not to veto and allows

a roll to made for an argument, he should live with the results.

SO WHY USE A MATRIX GAME?

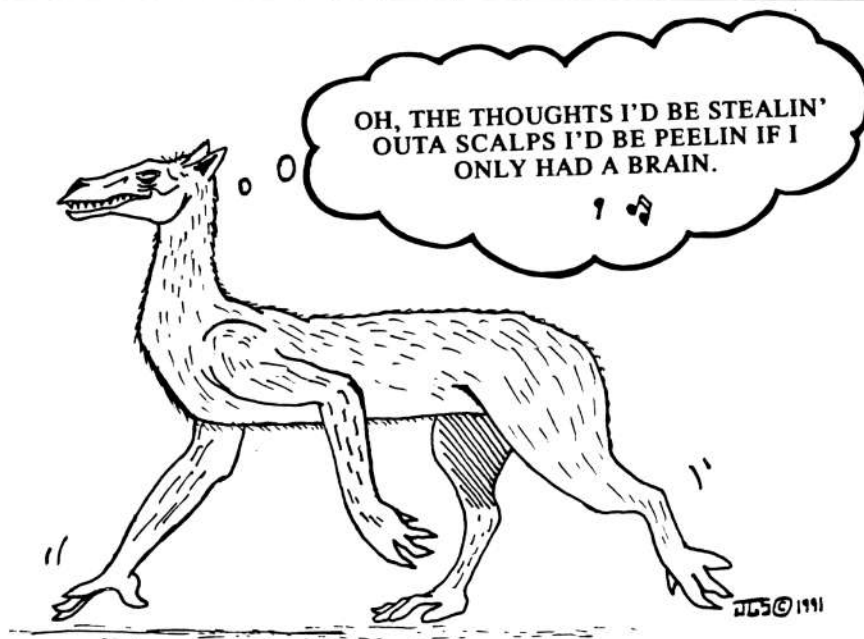
One can see that a Matrix Game is not a role playing game. So why does it help run one? The answer is simple. Matrix Games make it easy to run non-adventure events that do not role play well. Beyond that Matrix Games have other virtues to offer.

Playing a Matrix Game requires a shift in a player's thinking. Role playing centers a person's thoughts on the immediate and short term. If there is not a lot of action, players get bored. So, if plans do not work out quickly, they are dropped. At the same time, if there is too much action players get lost in detail and, again, forget the long term. Matrix Games allow players to do anything they want, but, only by strategic planning, can a player be allowed to make really powerful arguments. For example, Peasant Boy may make an argument that he is declared King, but most GMs would veto this as being STUPID. The same would not be true if the Duke of Albion were to

say the same thing. Peasant Boy might eventually be able to make such an argument if he precursored it by arguing that he was the son of Good King Ethelred, who was deposed by the Usurper Harold.

Players like Peasant Boy add a lot of spice to a game. Not only is he thinking about himself, but he is also suggesting to the GM possible future adventures (to rescue Ethelred, to sneak into Harold's castle, to raise the barons in rebellion, etc.). The GM now has another person giving creative input into the game. This makes GMing much easier. In addition, the player of Peasant boy is likely to be more interested in the game since he has a more active voice in what is going on.

The players in the D&D campaign I run are consistently planning ahead about what they want their character to do next. They take care of most of the non-adventure events, which frees me up to concentrate on the role playing aspects of my campaign. Far from detracting from the role playing, the Matrix Game draws the players into the game while reminding them that there is much more to life than just "hack-n-slash".



HOW CAN A GM USE A MATRIX GAME?

Matrix Games enhance other games tremendously. While I use one to backup my RPG, they are also useful in running miniatures, political games, diplomacy games, etc.

Some applications you might try include:

- Matrix arguments quickly settle non-adventure situations like, social climbing, business deals, politics, negotiations, etc.
- Allow players to do character growth by presenting arguments. This is guaranteed to create unique characters since players will not be making the exact same arguments.
- Have Magic Users gain their spells by presenting arguments.
- Settle large scale campaign events (wars, raids, natural disasters, etc.) by arguments.

EXAMPLES

Look through the following examples of what a Matrix Game can allow the players to add to an RPG. The examples are from the D&D* games I run in Bloomington, Indiana. (Note that after each game, the player gets to make 2 arguments to advance his character. One can be used to improve his skills and characteristics while the other is used to establish social contacts.)

Mark D'Amberly Human Fighter-Magic User

Mark is a Fighter/Magic User who, aside from adventuring, has very high social aspirations. He wants to become a powerful man in the kingdom by marrying the Earl's daughter and making a name for himself. Here are some of the arguments Mark has made to do this:

Action: While out riding one day, Mark rescues the Earl's beautiful daughter, Marie, from her runaway horse.

Result: Marie falls madly in love with Mark.

Reason: 1. Mark is her hero.
2. He is a handsome dashing figure.

3. She is of marrying age and looking for a husband.

This is a weak argument, but I let him roll on it and it passed! I declined to make a counter-argument.

Mark then makes another argument.

Action: Mark, inspired by Marie, decides to study courtly manners.

Result: Mark is preparing for life at court.

Reasons: 1. Mark hopes to become a member of court.
2. Mark does not want to be seen as uncouth by the court.
3. Having proper manners could help in his rise through the ranks.

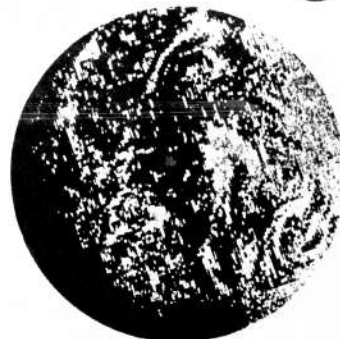
I decide to make a counter-argument against Mark's argument.

Action: Yes And...

Result: Mark gains the skill Etiquette.

Reasons: 1. He hires a teacher for 100 gp.
2. You can't learn manners on your own.
3. Good manners are vital for social growth.

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Notice that if Mark wins this round, only his Results will take place. If I win the round, both Results would occur. It turned out that both of these arguments did happen, so Mark gained a new skill in etiquette while preparing for life at court.

In another session Marks makes the following argument.

Action: Mark goes to a small tournament in Anjou.

Result: He wins the joust and comes home richer (2000 gp).

Reasons:

1. Mark is an excellent warrior.
2. Mark is an excellent horseman.
3. Mark was greatly underestimated because he was a stranger.

I present a counter-argument.

Action: No, actually Mark becomes lost in the woods and has a fight with the Green Knight.

Result: Mark beats the Knight who becomes a fast friend.

Reasons:

1. Knights often fight at cross roads.
2. Mark does not know the terrain well.
3. Armand the Green Knight is a man of honor.

In this case, if I win the die roll, only my Result will occur. If Mark wins his Result will take place.

Mark's argument wins and my counter-argument did not actually happen, even though after hearing it, Mark would have preferred my Results to his own.

Later Mark presents this argument;

Action: Mark uses his Resist Charm ability to help glean information about Othar's magic sword.

Result: Mark learns about the powers of the sword.

Reasons:

1. Mark knows the sword tried to control him, so it must be enchanted.
2. Mark is familiar with charm spells.
3. Mark's friend at the magic school helps him by researching magic swords.

This argument won, which allowed Mark to fully utilize his new magic sword.

Here is another argument Mark presented:

Action: Mark visits the Faeries' cave to learn the Charm Monster spell.

Result: Mark can now use that spell.

Reasons: 1. Mark saw the Faeries charm a monster.

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2. Mark speaks their language.
3. Mark pays them to teach him the spell.

I counter-argued.

Action: Yes, Mark visits the Faeries' cave, **BUT**
Result: He does not learn the spell and leaves the cave ten years older.

- Reasons:**
1. Mark knows the Faeries are dangerous.
 2. Faeries' magic can age people.
 3. Mark went to the cave alone (easy victim).

This time my counter-argument won and Mark received only a few grey hairs for his efforts.

Mark used his matrix arguments to advance himself in skills, magic and social standing. Some of his arguments covered events that could have been solo adventures (going to the tournament or into the Faeries cave, for example.). Others dealt with purely non-adventure events (researching the magic sword and learning etiquette). Lastly, he made an argument about an event that is very hard to run in RPGs (namely rescuing Marie and her falling in love with him). Consider the possibilities of what else Mark could propose by use of the Matrix system. Perhaps you are beginning to see how powerful a tool the Matrix Game can be to an RPG campaign.

Players are literally "making up" what they want to happen by presenting arguments. This shifts some of the burden off the GM to the players. The game becomes more of a shared creation than the GM's baby. For instance, I had not even decided that the Earl had a daughter, let alone named her. Mark made her up. Since Mark's argument added something to the campaign I allowed him to roll and see if it happened.

AFTERWARD

Matrix Games first appeared in 1988. Since then, they have been run at conventions in both England and in the United States. More than likely, you have never heard of them before. I hope that after

reading this article you would like to learn more about them. If you would like to know more, please write me and I'll be glad to send you some additional information. I publish a newsletter on experimental games (Experimental Game Group - EGG for short). In addition I sell a beginners Matrix Game to introduce new people to what I believe is a new genre of gaming. Thanks for giving the article a read! □

** Editor's Note: The following tables will come in handy for reference if you choose to run a Matrix Game. If you enjoyed Chris' article please let him know. For more information on Chris Engle's newsletter, refer to the Market Platz.*

TABLES:

Table I: Roll needed to win

<i>Argument, supported by 3 reasons</i>	3 or less
<i>Argument, supported by 2 reasons</i>	2 or less
<i>Yes/And Counter Argument</i>	4 or less
<i>Yes/But Counter Argument</i>	3 or less
<i>No/Actually Counter Argument</i>	2 or less

Table II: Modifiers

GM declares Argument Strong	+1
GM declares Argument Weak	-1

Table III: Argument Format

Action
Result
Reasons (3)

Table IV: Counter-Argument Formats

YES (the player's action takes place) AND (a second result occurs)
YES (the player's action takes place) BUT (a different result occurs)
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