

Goldrush

The Rubicon Conspiracy

A Retrospective of Five Years

The purpose of this article is to go into some of the background of the recently concluded *Goldrush* campaign. This article will go into plot points, the rules system, and some general observations. It will also try and clarify why certain decisions were taken the way they were.

What was the actual Rubicon Conspiracy?

These games are set around 6 months after the events of the movie *Serenity*, the fallout from the evidence that was broadwaved is still being felt and the government is only just clinging on to power. Three high-ranking government officials hatch a plan to keep the government in power by both planting fake evidence and perpetrating an alleged terrorist attack. Once discovered, the public would be outraged and then the government would have to crack down with the intention of whipping the public into frenzy, which would then have the hopeful side effect of returning the incumbent president back to power.

Was this always the plan?

Not really, the original outline for *Goldrush* was as a single weekend event that roughly followed the events of the *Dropzone* one-day event (albeit in an expanded form with materiel that had to be cut out from the one day event that would ultimately make it back into the campaign proper). The *Goldrush* name came from the fact that people would be prospecting, trying to make their fortune whilst other stuff happened around them. I have to credit (or blame) Andy Flood for starting the ball running that would lead us to run that first game at *Dropzone*, as it was a conversation in the aftermath of *Dropzone 2009's The Last Great Adventure* discussing what game universes could utilise some of the great costume we had seen that weekend, *Firefly* was mentioned and one thing led to another.

Why the name Rubicon?

When writing the overall campaign arcs and backstory I would be lying if various TV series or films didn't inspire me. A big influence on this campaign was the TV series *Rubicon* which looks at the lives of intelligence analysts whilst at the same time a bunch of government types and industrialists plot a supposed terrorist attack to line their own pockets. It only had a limited run but is definitely worth

your valuable time. The term Rubicon is used in the series to describe crossing a point of no return and allegedly dates back to Roman times when Julius Caesar led his armies across the Rubicon on the road to Rome with the intention of overthrowing the current government.

What's in the Silver Case?

Initially this was a homage to the film *Ronin*, in that film you never find out what is in the case and I initially intended to do the same but a creative decision taken relatively early on that was that this case had been such a focal point for some people, particularly in that first game (at *Dropzone 2010*) that it would ultimately need resolving and that's how we then decided to bring it back into the main plot. It would have a valuable relic of Earth-that-was as well as a military decoding device that would be needed. I seem to recall choosing the flag as the relic happened quite quickly on, as it just seemed to fit thematically.

Character Advancement Vs. Player Advancement

Another question that was asked in the early days was about Character Experience Points or XP, would they be any awarded at the end of a game. This is something that never really featured in the initial design process when we were putting the players handbook together. There's been some debate on the relative merits of awarding XP on some of the Facebook LRP pages, with a lot of polarisation on various points. If I'm honest I've never been motivated in point scoring like this usually entails, I've always been more motivated by a characters story. Skills are merely the tools players have to pick in order to give their characters abilities they wouldn't normally have.

Thinking on I wouldn't be averse to including some kind of skill advancement but I would need convincing that there is a desire for this from the player base and that it wouldn't get in the way of the story as ultimately it is the story that drives me forward.

You get out, what you put in

Some people turn up to LRP events expecting to be entertained and often go home not having had a good time because the plot didn't revolve around them. Actually there's two points I'm going to make here: -

- A character background plays a much more important role in a game like this as the Ref team can then write you into the story and make you part of it. This isn't really possible if you write two lines or say something like "They have a dark history" or "my parents were killed by outlaws, I hunted them down and killed them in revenge". These really are examples of what not to do at least not without talking to the Ref Team as well. The design team can write stuff for characters if necessary but I've always found it's so much more fulfilling for both parties when working with great source material. *Goldrush* has given us both extremes when it comes to backgrounds, some were incredibly detailed and a joy to read and others less so but always we worked with what we had trying to give players the best time possible. A more detailed background lets us tie

characters together and gives a springboard to role-play when Time In is eventually called.

- A Role Playing Game, whether live action or table top requires interaction with other characters, if you just sit on the side and don't get involved, again you are not going to get the best out of the game. If you want to stay dark and mysterious at the back of the room, then there's also a very good chance no one is going to interact with you. A LRP game is not an exercise in point scoring or achievement grabbing like a video game, it's an interactive experience, and the key word is interactive.

"This isn't *Lost!*"

This is a statement I made a couple of times and by that I meant I was never not going to give you the answers to the campaign. I've been on some LRP campaign's that delight in getting you to ask questions and never give you answers; this was not going to be like that. The rough plan was always something along the following lines: -

- Game #1 & #2: Give the Players questions to ask
- Game #3: Give them the answers
- Game #4 & #5: What do they do with those answers?

The original plot for each game was roughly laid out as follows: -

- Game #1: Jacobs
- Game #2: Clinic
- Game #3: Wedding
- Game #4: Trial
- Game #5: ???

The actual sequence of games changed in that the trial of Joshua Morgustein and the Wedding were originally the other way around to how they were produced but we felt that the playing of the audio file (which was always going to be game #3 regardless of plot) would play better against the setting of a trial in a courthouse and also I felt the Morgustein plot needed resolving sooner than it was going to be as it was still in the mind of the players that had been on that first game. Looking back I think I would actually have had the Trial game as Game #2 and move the clinic to Game #3 as I think that would have flowed better but hindsight and all that. Looking back, I think playing the audio could have worked equally well in either game (Trial or Clinic).

Staying on games for a moment, there was a rough plan mapped out for each one right at the beginning, initially only a few bullet points for each event but that would help form the roadmap for the campaign. The only game that was a big unknown was the last one, there was a couple of rough ideas but these really didn't take any shape until after Game #4 had happened and we had a firmer idea of what the players were intending to do. As an example, the players could have made a deal with the Alliance back on Game #4, it was probably unlikely

but it could have happened and I had considered what might then happen to the events of Game #5, as they would have been adapted around that outcome.

From an early point I wanted the ending of the game to fall to the players, I wanted it to be their choice and whilst the ending ultimately might not have been the one I would have liked, I'm incredibly happy that it is the one the players chose and I know how much that decision was debated and agonised over in the time before it actually happened.

Smash it, Twist it, Pull it

I'm a fan of players actually having to do something in order to use their character skill, it's not always achievable but I'm always on the lookout for a new methodology, this is how the Bop-It's came to be used. I'm relatively happy at the way the skill system has evolved over the course of the games. Probably the skill that changed the most is Code Breaking, changing from the original method to the one we have now and then adding an additional option with an optional app for smartphones (third party I hasten to add). With a skill it's often a case of treading the line between playability and realism; it's all well and good having a great fiz-rep (Physical Representation) but if the player can't actually do the thing then it becomes a source of frustration.

There are some tweaks coming for Season 2 but the source ideas of the system will be staying roughly the same. A decision taken at the beginning was that there would be no Tabletop system for piloting. To give people some background; in the *Star Wars* games I've been involved in, the various pilots would resolve their battles in a table top game but the universe of *Firefly* doesn't really cater for that kind of intense spaceship combat.

Similarly I'm not a fan of pointless skills, or skills you can take that there is no point in taking as there is no opportunity to use them on game. I was and still am very keen that there being an opportunity to use all and every skill that your character has taken.

The Wayward Endeavour

This was always meant as a launching point for characters in that to provide a central hub that would make tying backgrounds together slightly easier for us as refs. There was never a plan to run one of the games on there even though it was considered at several points. Similarly for the named NPC's, *Carter Jacobs* had been part of the overall campaign in the back of my mind since the first event at *Dropzone* and he was always going to be the focus of Game #1 mainly to start sowing the first seeds of the conspiracy plotline. Had the character not been as well received as he was then I did have a couple of backup ideas, one of which was using *John Herod* (*Ellis Billington's* number two on the Endeavour) but that was never needed and his story may now go in a very different direction after the events of Game #5.

Wot no Reavers?

Of all the plot points that got debated during the writing sessions, this is probably the most debated. Reavers are a part of the *Firefly* universe that we

hinted at back in Game #2 where the players got to a planet just after an attack. Whether or not to have them actually appear in the game was something we toyed and debated for Games #3, #4 and #5. Ultimately they didn't appear because we couldn't reason a way to do them justice, because they are such an overwhelming force. We were concerned that if deployed we would be looking at a TPK (Total Party Kill), having been on enough *Aliens* based games, I've seen first hand what monsters like that can do. That's not to say I'm ruling them out of an appearance at a later date though.

Favourite Moments

I will take away a lot of moments from these games but a few do stand out: -

- From the first game when the cryo pod opened and Alex Gage jumping back in surprise and then the look on his face when he sees what's inside.
- The look on people's faces when they hear the Stockburn audio file for the first time and they begin to understand what has been going on.
- Emmaline slapping Smudger, I only saw it out of the corner of my eye but it's that kind of instinctive roleplay I love to see.
- The first IC meal, I wish I could take credit for it but it's kudos to the players for making this happen.

The Future

I had never planned to carry the campaign on past the fifth game or even from that first *Goldrush* that I had initially mapped out before Pete and Rob came on board. As I mentioned during the debrief, I've been on several campaigns that never really ended and just stopped leaving unanswered questions in their wake. I was determined not to do that so this campaign with these characters so it was always going to end with the fifth game. The idea for a second campaign occurred somewhere between Games #3 and #4. Once again, I have taken a film as inspiration and I have started to map out plot points in a basic sense. Of course a second campaign was only going to happen if there was a demand for it, and apparently there is.

Season 2 will be set in the same universe and the same timeline as Season 1 so events that have happened will be part of that universe and will be referenced as such. Similarly events of Season 1 will now form part of the history of the universe and as such will be included in the next version of the Players Guide as back-story. In terms of bringing characters back, I might ask to bring one or two back as scripted NPC's but for the most part, however hard it is (and I can sympathise having been there) it is time to say goodbye to these characters.

Conclusion

I think I achieved virtually everything I wanted to with this first season of *Goldrush* (it still feels weird writing 'first season') and I've stated several times (in case you missed it) that I've been completely overwhelmed by the response and I hope that Season 2 (when it happens) can live up to what has gone before.

James Bloodworth

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