

Goldrush

In the Garden of the Winter Queen

A Retrospective of Two out of Three Games

If you are reading this then I'm guessing you potentially read my last retrospective on the previous campaign *The Rubicon Conspiracy*. I wasn't going to write another after the premature end of the most recent one but maybe I'm trying to find some catharsis. What this document is going to try to do is explore the background of the second *Goldrush* campaign, try and identify issues and work out where it ultimately went wrong. I'm not trying to project blame onto anyone (with the exception of probably myself but more of that later) but if you feel I am blaming for anything you then it's not intentional. I've always said in games there has to be someone who says either "Yes that's great" or "No that's rubbish" and for *Goldrush* that would be me. As I'm sure Pete and Rob would tell you we had some spirited discussions in the past concerning plot points, prop design and any other element you would care to mention but ultimately, I would call it, as Head Ref, that is my responsibility.

What was the background to the game?

As the *Rubicon Conspiracy* was coming to its climax, I seem to recall I'd made it pretty clear to the players attending that last game at Fort Widley that this would be the last time they would play their characters. This made a lot of sense to me as I've done numerous LARP campaigns that promised a lot but, for various reasons, were never completed or left characters hanging in situations never to be resolved and I was quite determined that *Goldrush* would not end like that. The first ideas for a second series of games started percolating somewhere between running Games 4 and 5. Once again I had taken inspiration from a recently watched film (and guilty pleasure), in this case *The First Great Train Robbery*, the idea of a heist of some kind seemed to make a lot of sense and fit a lot of the criteria I was already conceptually drawing up. Perhaps even more so when you consider so many of the original episodes revolve around a robbery of some kind ("The Train Job", "Ariel" and "Trash"). Looking back, it strikes me now that if *Rubicon* was our "Serenity", then *Winter Queen* would be our regular episode of "Firefly", I wonder now if that was one of the underlying problems?

Ultimately wherever the story would take us for the second season, early on I was quite keen on it not being quite as epic as the galactic conspiracies that were such key points of the first campaign. The end of the last game seemed to finish

on such a high I found myself caught up in its wake and duly announced that "Goldrush will return" in classic end-of-James-Bond-film-style. That was in June 2015, the inability to book a suitable site on a suitable date for 2016 meant that any return would be delayed (of course my being in hospital in March 2016 and three months off work took its toll as well). I do seem to recall that when we were able to secure two dates in 2017 it was too tempting to resist, I can still remember when the countdown app on my phone said there were 500 days left until the first game.

What was the plan?

As before I had planned the *Winter Queen* campaign as three acts, the set-up, the chase, the pay-off or as I would call them, the funeral, the robbery, the getaway. *WQ*¹ went pretty much as planned and I would say I was relatively happy with the execution. *WQ2* was obviously going to be the robbery, I hadn't written anything specific for the players to do as such, I'd left various potential plot points dangling as potential ways in as I wanted that part to be player led and would be something I would react to.

I'll probably talk about this more later but when it became apparent that *WQ3* would not happen due to the low numbers on *WQ2* the majority of the plotlines then got dumped (ironically if you read my previous retrospective) a full on Reaver attack, I had finally decided that the time was right and had started looking into potential makeup and costumes for them. As it was the majority of the second game happened quite organically and I was relatively happy with the way it panned out, we were able to give some characters the closure they had been seeking if it wasn't particularly well (from my perspective) executed. The third game would have been the getaway, a double cross and then Reavers, I would have brought back characters from *WQ1* to try and bookend the campaign of games.

Was there anything planned post Winter Queen?

Bizarrely there was, but not a campaign but rather a series of short one-shot games set in the same universe tentatively called *Goldrush Stories*, I hadn't got much further than that (not even talking to Pete and Rob) apart from a couple of ideas in note form on my iPad which will probably now not happen.

Thicker than Water?

One problem with the *Rubicon* story (from my perspective anyway) was that the player group had no common background and were thrown together by circumstance. Whilst there is nothing wrong with this approach (and how realistically most player groups in a lot of other LARP's come together) I was keen to try something different. The idea of a family unit was a relatively early component of the overall game design and lead naturally to the idea of producing the family tree, so everyone would see their place and how they were related to each other (I didn't realise how much of a pain it would be to put together and if I ever do another one I've learned some interesting lessons in terms of design).

¹ Please note that WQ refers to the games in "In the Garden of the Winter Queen" campaign

Having every character being related to each other could (at least I thought it would) open up another avenue of creating tension among the player group. The idea of everyone coming together for a funeral as well was a very early design component (I've often found it hard to resist a classic cliché). I still stand by the decision as I think it helped generate some of the best roleplay I've seen for a while, even more so on the second (and would turn out to be last) game.

Hard vs Soft: The Skills Question

One thing I've always been quite keen on with my games is that for skills the players have to actually "do something" whenever possible in order to enact the skill. If you think about it, Combat using Laser-Tag is totally a hard skill system, you have to be able to aim and utilise your chosen weapon (in some ways then I guess NERF isn't too different and we won't talk about the complications that arise from using a vocal system). The first thing we introduced was the Morton Bullet Box (or MBB) as we were looking to move away from SAMS as our primary medical system. In the very early design stages of the game as a whole (before even Dropzone 2010) we were looking at various "Operation" style games but nothing we found off the shelf really fitted with what we wanted to achieve, they were either too simple, too complex or too bulky. We talked about creating custom versions with multiple options before we settled on the single Bullet Box that we ended up with. Similarly, with the hacking skill, we went from having nothing to using Pocket GameBoy's running Tetris to the web based system we had one the last couple of games. I haven't even mentioned the (infamous?) Bop-It's.

But what do you do if a person really can't do the skill? If they can't play Tetris, or connect to a WiFi network or play Operation? I had one player who wanted to play a doctor but just didn't have the dexterity needed to use the MBB, similarly I had new players who needed more time getting to learn how the combat system worked and, personally, I don't think I served any of them very well. I'm not sure what I could do different apart from laying out in the design document exactly how the skills system works more than I already had. Arguably this is one the areas where SAMS scores very highly against what we had in that anyone can do it (I've talked about my issues with SAMS at various points and I've had lengthy discussion with Tim A as well). This is something I've been wrestling with over the course of both games and since and is certainly one of the factors that has led me to my decision to withdraw from writing/running games at this stage.

If I was doing all of this again I'm genuinely not sure what design choices I would pick. One of my key LARP design criteria (maybe even my primary) has always been about balancing the line between Realism and Playability, we had a more realistic system but did we sacrifice too much in the playability stakes? The point of the game (at least one of them) is to give players the fantasy of doing things they wouldn't ordinarily be able to do and maybe in my drive for more realism, I dropped the playability ball. If, and it's a massive if at this stage, I was to run another game then I would look at the skill system with a lot more detail, I probably need to play some other systems and see how things are resolved elsewhere. Ultimately this was my failing as I was the one who kept pushing in this realm.

Was it something I said?

Dates for the 2017 games were first announced in February 2016, booking for the new campaign opened back on October 7th (much later than planned due to my aforementioned hospital stay) and all 18 places for the first game were gone within a week with a significant number also paying for the second game in September and also deposits for the proposed 3rd game.

A week, all booked, job done.

Or so I thought.

The first warning signs started in late November with the first two dropouts happening relatively close to each other. Now this isn't unusual by any stretch, I've always said that reality takes precedence over our fantasy lives and people committing and then being unable to follow through for whatever reasons is part of that. What I wasn't prepared for were the numbers that would drop out over the course of the next couple of months, of the original 18 who booked in that first week only 11 would go on to play that first game. I realise 7 people may not sound like much but when you are balancing the budget around 18 and you lose nearly 40% it's a bit of a hit. If it hadn't been for some active recruitment on the part of a couple of players we would have been in serious trouble. Ultimately April's game ran with 15 players, 3 less than target, the September game ran with just 9, It was only because of some careful book-keeping on Pete's side that we were able to mount the games at all but there was no margin for anything and we paid for some things out of our own pockets. With so few bookings for game 2 we knew in the run up that it was going to be the final one.

You try not to take it personally, but when people tell you the dates don't work for them when you had published them so far in advance and they obviously worked when they first booked...

That's my rant over, but this would lead to a period of deep personal frustration on my part that would, unfortunately, permeate into the campaign and my social interaction as a whole and is something I still carry to a degree.

So where do you think it went wrong?

In the cold light of day, I think I've identified a few reasons: -

- **Existing Characters:** As previously mentioned *WQ* would involve all brand-new characters and none from the previous *Rubicon* campaign. Looking back this undoubtedly cost me some players, I remember someone had a go at me about not understanding how attached players get to their characters, I remember I replied I did and that was why I was giving them closure. In the Laser-Tag LARP hobby we tend to play a lot of one-shot disposable games with disposable characters, recurring characters are rare but not completely unheard of. Probably the longest character I've ever had was my Wizard on a set of 15 Arthurian based games in the noughties, I was one of only two players who had played

every single game and the ending to that was hard but appropriate. I still stand by the decision to have all new characters on *WQ* even though, as stated above, it lost me players.

- **Game Design:** A good friend and someone whose opinion I value turned to me after *WQ1* and told me that it would have been a great game, 15 years ago. When I asked what he meant he thought it was the right game for the wrong audience. Looking back retrospectively I think he was onto something, I still think a heist game was the right move but I would have changed the backstory for all concerned to be more conducive to what was going on. I think people were expecting more family stress and I didn't deliver it, the family element was not the primary drive of the plotline.
- **Game Structure:** The majority of the games I've run are what I would call "Long Linear", that is there is always a path in the background that the players should follow. This differs from what I call a "Short Linear" in that you move from encounter to encounter to encounter, from A -> B -> C -> D -> E, in true old school style. If you look back the *Rubicon* games then they were mostly standalone but always came back to the overall arc plotline, so each game led to another but the path within that game was relatively self-determined by the players reacting to whatever situation we laid on for them. Looking back, it feels like *WQ* was one game in three parts and that's great if the players are up for that. It also has to be said that a Linear structure like that is relatively old fashioned, a lot of games seem to have adopted what I tentatively call "Linear Group", in this groups of characters gather in one central IC location, figure out what are going to do to further their own plotlines, tell the GM's their intentions who then try and organise a "short linear" or something similar so they can accomplish their goals. I'm not saying there is anything bad with this approach but it's nothing I've got a huge amount of experience with so typically with *WQ* I went with what I knew best and had seemingly worked before. I ended up with one game in three parts when I should have been aiming for was three games with an overall plotline spanning the games.

In conclusion

In the Garden of the Winter Queen was ultimately a failed experiment that didn't engage people in the same way that *The Rubicon Conspiracy* did. There are multiple small reasons why as opposed to one big reason but as I stated right at the beginning, as head GM this was my call and my responsibility. I do and will regret some of the choices I made but as someone once said, "Regret is part of being alive, but keep it a small part", I will try and live up to those words.

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