

Who should use FFRE?

A sort of Designer's Notes

by
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I've tried, on several occasions, to write a Designer's Notes document for FFRE. I have, on my hard drive, a quote by Brian Gleichman from Usenet, where he defines (and if I recall correctly, the quote is a direct response to a request from me) the questions that a Designer's Notes document should answer.

I've given up. I'm not going to write that exact kind of document because, for some reason, I can't. That's not to say that FFRE is an unconsidered design, not at all. I've thought a *great deal* about roleplaying gaming. And I've examined many dozens of systems, yet discarded them all as unplayable. I do not wish to encourage the creation of RPG rules systems that are unconsidered or undefended. The unconsidered system is *never* worth playing under, and the undefended system, the unexplained system, will not attract users, especially if it has any learning curve - which a complete and well designed system will, by definition, have.

But the solution I've eventually come up with is to simply explain what kinds of gamers FFRE is intended for. Who should use it, and who shouldn't. That's not as good as a proper Designer's Notes, but it's all I'm capable of, and I do think it has a lot of value.

I'd like to start with a quote from the book titled "Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering", written by Robin Laws and published by Steve Jackson Games, because it defines, succinctly, the kind of general approach to character creation that I want:

"Roleplaying is fantasy shopping for guys"

-Robin Laws

That is, pretty much, what FFRE is. One huge shopping list of cool abilities for characters, all of which are either realistic, or suitable for the fantasy genre, or both, followed by rules for how those abilities can be used, what they can do, and how they interact with and affect each other.

FFRE is not a system only for fantasy, it's just that currently I'm very fond of the genre. I've developed my own setting, a fantasy Europe, an early medieval Europe where magic works, altered from our timeline by the effects of the existence and (relative) prevalence of magic.

A complete and well-designed RPG system answers a lot of basic questions about what Humans are, what Humans can be, how and how much Humans can differ from each other, and how Humans can change. Since I've put a lot of time and effort into trying to provide answers to these questions, these exceedingly important questions, it would be a waste, and a mistake, to use FFRE only for the fantasy genre. If FFRE has a genre, it would be that of "Humans", with the subtitle: "in a *realistic* setting". That's not to say there isn't room for

Elves, Dragons, intelligent Dogs (talking or not), Catgirls, genetically engineered warrior sub-species, or for magic, psionics or futuristic technology. Realism does not exclude those at all.

Any kind of RPG which I consider worth playing can be played under FFRE. Hard science fiction, spare opera, fantasy medieval, traditional fantasy, medieval without supernatural elements, modern day cops & robbers, heist/caper, espionage, intelligent animals escaped from a mad wizard's laboratory. Also many other kinds of RPGs are playable under FFRE, even though they are not ones I'd enjoy.

Making FFRE is a lot of work, and the first actual book, the v1.0 rules, will lack a couple of major subsystems. First and foremost it will lack rules for modern and futuristic firearms. This limits the application of the v1.0 rules, but is a consequence of the fact that it is bloody difficult to make rules for how bullets and beams interact with flesh, and even harder to make rules for how they interact with armour. Secondly, it will come with a simplified - and thus poorer - Martial Arts system. I do have the basic structure for a complete and flexible Martial Arts system, but "fleshing it out" will require a lot of work, and it's not a high priority for me (although I consider it more important than the firearm/beam weapon issue, because Martial Arts rules would be useful for my principal roleplaying gaming setting). Therefore both of these subsystems must wait until a later version of the rules.

As for the release date of the v1.0 rule book, I can say nothing, other than that I am working on FFRE, and that the days in which I give absolutely no thought to design issues are few and far between. FFRE is, basically, about the world I live in, and thus I am constantly prompted to think about it. Secondly, FFRE is, for me, a *need*. I have high standards for RPG systems, and for me, GMing using a system other than FFRE is comparable to urinating on the players. I feel compelled to give my players the best possible rules.

Types of players

Robin Laws defines seven types of roleplayers in his book. Some of those are the target audience of FFRE, and others most definitely are not.

One is the **Power Gamer**. FFRE is about characters trying to impose their will on the game world. It's about struggle, conflict. Characters decide to attempt to do difficult things, to strive after goals which they consider to be worthy and important. The character creation system is intended for the creation of individuals who are, at game start, of a general competence level far above that of the average game world denizen, and it allows the creation of characters with extreme localized prowess, for instance one-in-a-million Perception, Agility, Charisma or Intelligence (actually you can't get *exactly* that, as FFRE uses a very coarse-grained attribute scale; you get the choice between one-in-30'000 or one-in-3.5-millions), or very high skills.

The other is the **Method Actor**. FFRE is about seeing the world through your character's eyes, making decisions according to your character's background, personality and ambitions. It's about *being* your character. The rules are very much about individualization. You're not just playing a generic Knight or Courtesan or Assassin, you're playing a very particular Knight, or a very particular Courtesan, or a very particular Assassin. Due to the many axes of differentiation, the many numerically rated traits on the character sheet, and also due to the

many binary or tiered Advantages and Disadvantages, and the many skills, it is very, very improbable that there will be another character, anywhere in the game world, who has the exact same abilities as your character. One assumption behind FFRE is that capability individuality is conducive to psychological individuality. Your character isn't a piece in a board game, he's a living, breathing, changing person.

The third is the **Specialist**. Want to play a Druid? Sure, but what *kind* of Druid? A Mind-Bogglingly Gorgeous Heterosexual Irish Druid/Water-Sorceress with a fondness for dolphins and aquatic life? Sure, but what *kind* of Mind-bogglingly Gorgeous Heterosexual Irish Druid/Water-Sorceress with a fondness for dolphins and the aquatic life would you like to play? With so many character creation options, it is possible to individualize even quite specific character concepts. Specialist players are used, under more primitive systems, to always playing the exact same character. A Ninja is just that, a Ninja, and if the Ninja dies, the only option is to create a Ninja exactly like the first one. FFRE allows a great deal of customization, meaning that there is a lot of potential for variety within the same concept. "Variations over a theme", if you will. It is possible to make hundreds of Ninja, hundreds of Druids, hundreds of Knights, who are all capability-differently different from each other, but yet all quite well suited to Ninja'ing, to the Druidic life, or to a Knightly existence.

Specialists also, often, like to make characters who are good at something in particular (as opposed to characters who just *are* something in particular), and this FFRE supports very well. Supporting character excellence is an important design principle. Likewise, a Method Actor does whatever his character feels like doing, even if it goes against the goals of the other player characters. Since FFRE allows the creation of characters with extremely high specific abilities, a Method Actor type player can make such a character and use it to justify his membership of the adventuring fellowship (if there *is* such a thing - it's not a given that all roleplaying gaming campaigns will use a "party structure") - it's the reason why the other characters put up with his headstrong attitude.

As a player, I think of myself as a combination of Power Gamer and Method Actor, with Specialist tendencies (I like to play clever, sneaky characters, often ones with unusual intellectual advantages).

The **Tactician** likes choices and options, it is said. But what he really likes is in-game choices, tactical choices (duh!). And FFRE does not offer many of those. You make most of your choices during the character creation phase. Once the campaign begins, you just play your character as he is, according to his personality. The rules are designed such that players are hindered in using their own skills (i.e. *player* skill, as opposed to *character* skill) at micromanaging situations to reach the character's personal goals. The player makes the macro-strategic, strategic and tactical decisions, on behalf of the character, but the character himself makes the micro-tactical decisions, in all kinds of conflicts, including battles, social conflicts, and interaction with complex mechanical devices. Such conflicts are resolved according to the character's skill, by rolling dice. The player's influence is solely in making *large-scale* tactical decisions, such as whether to attack from the rear or flank, or whether to try to bribe or seduce, or whether to hurry or work very carefully and slowly when examining the strange alien device. Deciding between a back-hand swing or a subtle feint, that's the *character's* job. Likewise *he*, and not his player, decides on that tone of voice to use, which

exact words to use, what facial expressions and body language to utilize. When examining a strange alien machine, *he* swings the multi-analytic probe. Because of this, the Tactician will find FFRE unsatisfying. Playing FFRE is really, in many ways, much more like reading a series of novels than it is like playing a board game.

The **Butt-Kicker** will be find FFRE equally unsatisfying. He wants to win, and he wants to win in combat. Winning is not, however, ever assured in FFRE. It's all about uncertainty of outcome, any conflict has the potential to end with an unexpected result. Even in a very stacked fight, the underdog will have a microscopic chance of winning. Worse, combat is deadly realistic in FFRE. A fighter can go from hale-and-unhurt to dead due to a single hit. That is not common at all, but being hacked down from full combat readiness to a state of incapacitation, by a single blow, is quite likely. In FFRE, combat is by definition always heroic, because when a character draws his sword and chooses to fight, he is signalling that he is willing to risk his life for his cause, whatever that may be.

FFRE is designed in such a way that it produces very good stories, often stories that are positively brilliant. One may therefore assume that the **Story-Teller** would find FFRE to be to his liking, but that is not the case at all, as the Story-Teller has misunderstood, on a fundamental level, what a good story is. As an example of one of the very best stories possible, imagine a jungle-dwelling Negro, who is enslaved by Viking raiders and taken to Greenland to work in a mine. Completely unsuited to the arctic climate, he catches pneumonia and dies. That is a story of *utter brilliance*, because that is what *should* happen. The character comes *true*. His traits determine the outcome. As the Story-Teller would disagree vehemently with this, stating that the end of the Negro-abduction story is fundamentally wrong, it is evident that he (the Story-Teller, not the Negro!) will find FFRE most frustrating. People who share his absurd taste in stories should stay far away.

Robin Law's last gamer category is the **Casual** gamer. Here I can only ask a single, simple question: Why the *fuck* would a casual person choose to play under an RPG rules system with a rule book that is several hundred pages thick? (Granted, the rule book has not been written yet, but that is my best guess at how long it'd be). FFRE is for people who *care passionately* about good role playing and about creating good stories. Casualness has no place here, slackers need not apply.