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ADVICE

A Geek's Guide to Academic Committee Work

Mastering the dark art of curricular kung fu

Scott Akerman, Creative Commons

By Alex Small | OCTOBER 13, 2015

"I didn't spend all those years playing Dungeons & Dragons and not learn a little something about courage." — Blaine, The X-Files *(Episode: "Jose Chung's 'From Outer Space'")*

I'm a geek. Sure I'm not as au courant with gaming as some of my students, but I did my tour of duty in Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) campaigns back in high school, and I still like to roll the dice now and then to slay some orcs with my buddies. I still read science fiction and fantasy (even if not as much as I used to). I can quote lines from Monty Python and *The Silmarillion.* And during a recent conference trip to Vancouver I went to a symphony just to visit the theater where they filmed those dream sequences in *Battlestar Galactica.*

That is hardly an unusual profile for a physics professor, and it probably won't shock you that when I teach the twin paradox in relativity I use characters from *Orphan Black.*

However, lately my focus has shifted from dice and dragons to the minutiae of curriculum redesign and university curricular rules. After a youth spent in geeky and intellectual pursuits — disdainful of paperwork and bureaucratic rules — I'm now becoming a fully assimilated member of the university committee scene.

For a while this change bothered me. I felt weird about being able to give expert advice on how to slip a curricular proposal through a loophole. I felt like I shouldn't know the political and procedural situation well enough to explain in detail the various obstacles to introducing a new minor. I especially didn't like it when I reached the point where I could explain the difference between curricular constraints established by Title V of the California Code of Regulations and those put in place by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (My department wants to create a special path for students interested in teaching high-school physics.)

Doesn't this mean I'm becoming one of "the suits"? Am I being assimilated into the Borg-like entity that is university bureaucracy? Have I given my soul over to the service of Mordor?

Surely I'm not the only under-40 college professor who's struggled with his or her metamorphosis from a person focused on ideas and intellectual and creative pursuits to someone who knows his way around university committees and the fine print in administrative documents. Whether you're coming at this from a geeky perspective or that of some other subculture, it can be jarring to suddenly become an insider in a process that used to look so foreign, especially if that process still feels distasteful. Even now, when I've mastered some of the dark arts of curricular kung fu, it still annoys me to no end that even the simplest things require so many reports and meetings.

I didn't go to graduate school with the goal of spending my time on bureaucratic minutiae, yet here I am, and there's a part of me that's perversely feeling some professional pride in understanding these processes. What brought me peace of mind regarding mastery of administrivia was not a sober acceptance of adult responsibility. Rather, it was the realization that I'm just leveraging the skills that I developed playing D&D.

Gamers spend a lot of time reading rule books and learning loopholes. We toy around with scenarios for characters with multiple "classes" (e.g. warrior and wizard), contemplate which character traits will be most important in different situations, and try to optimize our characters' gear to minimize encumbrance while having a full repertoire of weapons, equipment, and magic items for different challenges.

By the same token, I know that an emphasis under a major has the same student-learning outcomes as the parent major, so I can create a new program without expanding the number of assessment reports that I have to do. This just means that a major is basically a magical bag of holding for emphases: I can fit as many emphases as I want inside a major without becoming encumbered by more paperwork!

Moreover, is reading through a book to find spells that are effective against multiple types of monsters all that different from paging through a catalog to find courses that will simultaneously satisfy multiple requirements? I'm not forsaking my roots; I'm just getting paid to do what I did as a teenager in the basement. All of those calculations to optimize the damage inflicted on a monster via different choices of weapons and skills were excellent training for maneuvering my way around a curriculum spreadsheet to map out the shortest chain of prerequisite courses from a freshman survey course to an advanced theory elective.

In navigating this transformation from outsider to insider, always distinguish between accepting your new skills and accepting the maddening nature of the bureaucracy. And be sure not to fall for magical charms and illusions.

Memorizing the map of the dungeon doesn't mean that you should drink the Kool-Aid in the magical vase that the monsters are guarding — that would require a saving throw versus poison. Never forget that you gain experience points for fighting a dragon, not becoming one. Use those experience points to add new proficiencies to your character sheet, but don't be seduced by enchanters parroting the latest buzzword.

You are on that committee to find a path through a thorny thicket of procedural thaumaturgy in pursuit of some goal that will benefit your work as a teacher, researcher, or mentor. Those endless meetings and reports are still obstacles to navigate, not holy relics to treasure. Delve into the rules and procedures like they're a new edition of the *Player's Handbook:* Your goal is to develop a strong character, not to make the book thicker.

Finally, remember that just as role-playing games are cooperative rather than competitive, a committee is a place to make allies, not enemies. A party that works together gets more treasure.

Take your inspiration from Scott on *Orphan Black,* who called upon his gaming buddies to help smuggle people and information out of Dyad. Good gamers learn the rules, find allies, work hard to build up some experience role-playing the sorts of scenarios that they'll need to handle, and then venture forth to find treasure … or at least create an interdisciplinary minor.

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and research, he coordinates semester conversion efforts for his department, chairs the academic programs committee of his university's Academic Senate, and uses his elven fighter's archery specialization to provide ranged-weapon support when members of his party explore dungeons.