

Roleplaying game strata – I. Initial ideas

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SUMMARY

I attempt to describe the roleplaying game Best Friends in terms of discernible layers of operation. I introduce what I think the different strata of the game are. I aim to explore these initial ideas further in future essays.

INTRODUCTION

When explaining the game system and play methods of *Best Friends* (Hutton 2005) I find myself describing it in terms of the different layers of design. This essay sets forth the layers that I perceived when I created *Best Friends*.

DISCUSSION

Commenting in Cues (Boss 2006) I stated the following layers, using the analogy of a planet to describe them.

Atmosphere: Player interactions, moment-to-moment decisions, 'fiction' stuff. Cloudy things on Vincent diagrams,¹ I think. These affect, and are affected by, 'Surface' stuff below.

Surface: Cues live here (along with players?). These are the things that we are aware of as players – in fact, what might appear to be the 'game' when read from the book. So attributes on a character sheet, values, equipment lists, rules texts, etc. These link up to the 'Atmosphere' and down into the 'Earth'.

Earth: Actual procedures, rules. How things on the surface are mechanically related, manipulated, affected, etc. What people call 'mechanics', probably. The actual things being manipulated or doing the manipulation don't live here though.

Core: I'm wondering if there are actually things that are even underneath the 'Earth' level. I think so but I'm not completely sure. These underpin the mechanics and rules: like permissions, inherent agendas?

It is in these terms that I describe *Best Friends* as follows.

Atmosphere: The shared imaginary story. No mechanics, but story is driven by cues on the 'Surface' below.

Surface: Characters have five cues called 'Hatreds' that define how they feel about one another. These Hatreds also indicate how 'Pretty', 'Smart', 'Tough', 'Rich' and 'Cool' a character is. The rules text lists typical activities associated with these cues and the varying levels that they may possess.

Another cue is a number of tokens called 'Friendchips' that allow for activities beyond the normal range of Hatreds.

Other 'colour' lives here too (including Stuff and Nonsense).

Earth: The rules allow for actions to succeed if they are in line with given levels of associated Hatreds. Actions not allowed by these rules may be accomplished by transferring a Friendchip to another player. The target of this exchange is determined by the acting character's Hatreds. The Hatreds themselves are determined by the group collaboratively allocating them to each other at the beginning of the game. The rules dictate that all the characters are thus interdependent and have investment in each other. Hatreds do not change, as there are no rules to do so.

Core: The various Hatreds when viewed on this level can actually be seen as permissions that the group has (sub?)consciously allocated amongst itself. In fact these allocations also generate expectation too. Friendchips are a manageable resource that allows players to specifically get additional permission. This extra permission is gained by transferring the resource. This is really what is going on in the group when playing. The levels of game design above follow directly from these deeply buried permissions/expectations.

CONCLUSION

I have found that many players just see *Best Friends* as being at what I term the Surface level. They take the game at face value and follow the rules as they are set forth in the text.

Some are able to understand the rules underpinning the text at the Earth level. However, almost all are unaware of the inherent permissions/expectations filtering up from the Core.

My aim is to get feedback on these ideas and see if they are (a) true, (b) meaningful, and (c) how they relate (or not) to existing models of roleplaying games.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

Baker, D.V., 2005. How RPG Rules Work, *anyway*, <http://www.lumpley.com/archive/156.html>.

Boss, E.C., 2006. Cues, *Fair Game*, <http://www.fairgame-rpgs.com/comment.php?entry=37>.

Hutton, G., 2005. *Best Friends*, http://www.1km1kt.net/rpg/Best_Friends.php, and <http://gregorhutton.com/roleplaying/>.

¹See Baker (2005) for diagrams.