

Beyond Birdseed: Bringing Immersion to Non-Combat Modules

by Kat Davis

When one hears about boffer LARPs, one generally first thinks of live combat. After all, it's right in the name; boffer refers to the foam weaponry used by players. There is a common belief that live combat is all these games have to offer, and that to be interested in a boffer LARP one must be interested in hitting other people with plumbing supplies. This belief is untrue.

In my experience, what actually brings boffer to life is the focus on immersion and simulation through deliberate action on behalf of the players. One of the main commonalities between boffer games is a focus on the principle of "What You See is What You Get". This principle manifests in the concerted effort by both staff and players to ensure that things in game can be reasonably represented by visible objects or actions. One does not frequently see flying, for example, because it is difficult to replicate flying without elaborate pulleys. Combat is an important part of the simulation. It contributes to the feeling of immersion and the conceit that, for the most part, if one wants to do something, one must physically do it. If one wants to hit someone else with a sword, one must physically do so. But there are other things that one might want to do. For example, if one wants to talk a cop into letting them near a crime scene, one must find the words that will convince the cop to do so. If one wants to open a lock without the key, they must actually physically pick that lock.

Most games create a world that drives players to desire to experience it. As they become immersed in the various stories being told, they get to confront new and powerful emotions. They get a chance to speak with non-player-characters and learn about the places within the world; to break into their "rival's" base, evade his guards, and steal his most treasured possession; to entertain at a fantastical masquerade ball. If the only draw of the game was combat, one would be better off taking a martial arts class. It's everything else that makes the world come to life.

And thus we understand the draw of the non-combat module. *Non-combat* in this case refers to a module wherein combat is ill-advised or not intended to be the focus of the module. Whether the goal is to trick a kidnapped prisoner into telling you what you need to know or swinging on a rope across a gaping chasm (chasm usually represented by rope lights on the ground), the player is given a chance to show off unique skills that either wouldn't be safe in a combat situation or are focused on less physical things. They also allow a player to explore new sensations or emotions as well as unique challenges.

There are several common breakdowns of non-combat modules prevalent throughout boffer LARPing. The most common, in my experience, is what is known as the *rogue module*. Rogue modules, as the name might suggest, focus around incorporating stealth into a tense situation. Usually, there are some guards that the players must sneak past undetected and some information that the players hope to get out of the encounter. Frequently there are a myriad of locked boxes or traps that players must work their way through and carefully disassemble.

The fun of rogue modules comes from the physical challenge of sneaking through the module. The players must work through physical challenges themselves, such as picking locks or dismantling traps, while risking detection by any guards or destruction of what the characters

have come to find. From an immersion standpoint, the players are expected to participate in all of the physical challenges themselves. Any lock that the players wish to bypass must actually be picked by the players with tools they have brought into the module (most rogues wouldn't go anywhere without their "rogue kit"). Any trap must be disabled by the players before it is triggered. Players must be quick, nimble, and aware of their surroundings. There is excitement in the threat of failure, but it is a very different sort of excitement than that found in primarily combat oriented modules. It also allows for players to engage in things that could be too hazardous or dangerous in a full combat module, such as exciting physical stunts.

By incorporating real-world skills such as stealth, lockpicking, or acrobatics, the participants get to utilize and showcase skills they might not usually get to while engaging in difficult challenges and struggling to complete their objectives within the time frame, without getting caught, or whatever other obstacles the game staff has created for them. The fact that the players must do all of this themselves adds to their emotional buy-in and raises the stakes.

A good example of this is a module from *Mirror Mirror* (Chimera Entertainment, Inc)¹, wherein the player-characters were looking to break open some eggs and avoid the wrath of the blind guardians who stood vigilant over the characters' objective. The intention was to avoid any detection, as the player-characters knew that any detection could easily result in the very powerful guardians killing them. When they arrived, they realized that the guardians were servitors of a rival Fae to the one who had sent them, thus upping the stakes even further as offending a powerful Fae was added to death as a possible consequence. The eggs were simulated by balloons with tea lights inside, forcing the players to use very sharp knives to open them while trying to remain completely silent. As an additional complication, the module was set at night in the woods with scattered branches and leaves everywhere. The guards would wander throughout, and, if they heard a noise, would swing in its general direction with lethal force. The players were constantly trying to move around silently and perform a difficult task, always afraid of detection.

Another common example of a non-combat module is what is colloquially referred to as a *talky module*. There are a couple of different flavors of talky module, but for the most part they revolve around the intent to acquire the objective, whatever it is, through discourse rather than violence. This breaks down into sub-classifications based on the objective of the module.

One common talky module subtype is a *diplomacy module*. Diplomacy modules generally involve player-characters arbitrating between two (or more) disparate factions. This can take several different forms, whether it's players trying to act as a jury in a court where a non-player character is on trial, trying to reconcile two disparate parts of a faction, or actually acting as diplomats for world powers of the game world. These modules highlight players who are persuasive or capable of thinking of unique solutions to problems. They allow players who are skilled in oration to shine.

These modules work best when there is already an established link for the player-characters to either the situation or the non-player-characters involved. If the staff gives the players a reason to care about the outcome and establishes the possible outcomes, the immersion is an emergent property of the puzzle that the situation creates. The players must solve the social puzzle with the tools given to them or suffer the consequences. They're forced to think critically and speak quickly and charismatically.

A good example of one of these sorts of modules was seen in *Shadows of Amun* (Older than Dirt Games, May 2015). Some player-characters were brought into a group which devoted itself to protecting the Pharaoh during the reign of Cleopatra. Some of the player-characters' superiors brought them in to add insight to a debate regarding whether or not protecting Cleopatra meant protecting her from herself. The characters had to be careful not to offend either of the disagreeing superiors while working to satisfy both of their concerns. On top of this, they knew that whatever solution they came up with would likely be put into effect, so they couldn't just pay lip service to satisfying the concerns. Each of the disparate factions' thoughts and opinions had to be weighed against what the player-characters knew of the situation (even things they couldn't tell their superiors) and come up with a satisfactory solution that would also actually solve the concern of safety.

Another particularly humorous example comes from *Cottington Woods* (Mangio and Mangio, September 2015), a fairytale-inspired game. In a plotline surrounding the kidnapping of children, Peter Pan approached the player-characters claiming that the dastardly Hook must be responsible. The player-characters, having been hoodwinked by Pan before, were suspicious but agreed to accompany him to confront Hook. They followed him down to the beach, where Hook and some of his crew were sitting drinking grog (not real - alcohol and live combat do not mix!) and enjoying the sun. Pan and Hook immediately started bickering, as Hook reminded the player-characters that Pan was the one infamous for kidnapping children. The player-characters had to talk both of them down so they could learn that neither Pan nor Hook was involved, and convince the two enemies to work together to find the kidnapped children. They had to navigate the obvious rivalry and manipulate the non-player-characters into overcoming it to achieve the player-characters' goals.

In both of these examples, players have a vested interest in appeasing both sides of the conflict to find a middle ground. Each presents different challenges for the player-characters to work to overcome, and the players must use quick-thinking and wits to find the words and conversational directions that allow for success of the character's goals. The immersion in these situations comes from the fact that the players are forced to rely on their own skills of oration and navigate whatever social issues the game staff has presented. The players must use the knowledge they have gained in the game and their own cleverness to solve whatever social puzzle is presented to them.

The other common type of talky module that I will talk about is the masquerade module. This is something of a misnomer, as it covers more than just masquerades. This module type involves a large block of time set aside for a ball, faire, or other large gathering of unique personalities. Usually, there are lots of non-player-characters representing plot hooks sent out to mingle, armed with information that the player-characters want. There may be games with in-game treasures as prizes, or contests such as bardic contests, dueling contests, or other small tests of skill. These modules are generally meant to entertain the majority of the player-character base and further their plots through investigation and socializing while giving them small, fun and unique opportunities to explore their skills. This is different from many other modules, which usually entertain a much smaller subset of players. Because of the shift in focus towards entertaining a larger percentage of the game at once, the staff of a game can invest in more set dressing. Lights, props, and costuming allow for a more decorated and atmospheric environment, which furthers the immersion for the players involved. They also allow

player-characters to push their agendas while perhaps breaking into different plots that interest them or help their friends if they are more socially inclined.

Cottingham Woods (Mangio and Mangio, January 2015) presented a particularly memorable example of this when they did a whole one-day event surrounding the Fairy Mist Ball, an event that touched all masquerades across time. This meant that player-characters could meet with any character, so long as they had once attended a ball. Several players were surprised to see deceased figures from their backstories meeting them face to face, such as parents or long-dead enemies. They were able to confront unresolved trauma or wheel and deal for information. It also allowed players to break out their fanciest clothing and expand their character's perceived image and wardrobe for a formal event.

Several events have done more casual town fair-type modules. In an *Occam's Razor* (Darksteel Games, November 2014) event, they managed to balance an atmosphere where one could participate in silly games to win prizes, but also speak to a creepy blind psychic who seemed to have individual insight memorized for each player-character. The feel of a small-town New Hampshire atmosphere was highlighted while preserving the horrific undertones of the game. *Seven Virtues* (Caruso) managed to create a captivatingly immersive atmosphere with their Dark Circus event that brought interesting plot hooks to characters while giving an experience that one player described as "walking into another world and losing yourself there". These types of games exist to deepen player immersion and the feel of the world around them. The intent is to make the world feel real and give the players an idea of the way their character's lives go when they're not living them.

Some modules don't necessarily fit into either a talky module or a rogue module. Dreamscapes, modules where the point is to experience an event rather than challenge it or defeat it, and similarly strange mods can also be potent. These modules all generally share the trait of being designed to evoke a reaction from players. Some dream modules or other strange settings involve puzzles connected to the esoteric concepts of the dream, or simply have the players experience a tense or emotional scene.

Shadows of Amun (Older than Dirt Games, October 2013) gave a particularly powerful example of setting a scene to cause an emotional reaction in their players. During a gathering of a mystical group of player-characters and their Elders to tell stories, a God was summoned to kill all of their Elders and consume their souls in front of the helpless player-characters. This is an interesting example because while combat happened, it was not the focus of the module. The players were repeatedly paralyzed and forced to watch as the figures they looked to for guidance were utterly destroyed in front of them. They tried to fight, but quickly realized that fighting was futile and they were hopelessly outmatched. The module ended with the player-characters running blindly through the woods dragging the bodies of their mentors behind them, shell-shocked and crying from the overwhelming horror they had experienced. The module did not offer any kind of closure, but it was incredibly immersive in the creeping realization that fighting back was pointless and they could not hope to beat it.

Endgame (Black Crayon Games) took a different tack at evoking strong emotion by asking several characters to sacrifice memories and parts of themselves in one plotline. This was done through "mind-dives", modules where a few player-characters entered another character's mind. These modules played out scenes from the character's past and manifested parts of them or their personality through physical objects or non-player characters without any

explanation to those viewing the scenes. To the one hosting the mind-dive, it was a chance to confront powerful and difficult facets of their backstory; a chance to explore who their character had been and how they had gotten to who they had become. To everyone else involved it was part puzzle, part theatre; deeply surreal and impactful for all involved due to the clever use of mechanics (trying to figure out what each object represented) and the emotional stakes involved. Characters were literally playing with their friends' minds and memories and had to accept all repercussions for their actions afterwards.

The immersion presented in the last couple of examples is different from the more traditional examples above. The immersion created for the players is created less by the representation of what the players are doing and seeing and more in their buy-in of the scene. Typically, the more emotionally driven a scene is, the more deeply a player can empathize with their character. The very emotional scenes create a special kind of resonance that allow characters to experience raw emotion from their character's perspective. This type of module is heightened by the use of less concrete representation. As the intent is to evoke strong reaction in the player, stripping away much of the typical set dressing allows a more focused experience. The immersion comes in from the strong emotion the players feel, allowing them to become more immersed in their character's headspace.

There are ways to add unique and interesting non-combat elements to more traditional modules. The use of clever mechanics to represent puzzles or other parts of the game can allow for very simulationist approaches to non-combat roles. Putting effort into including complicated and immersive non-combat facets in combat modules can round out immersion in all parts of the game.

For example, *Rabbit Run* (Eddy et al.) uses a clever hacking technique that is very resonant with the cyberpunk genre they are embodying. While most of the game is very combat-heavy, there are some characters who are focused on hacking, which is represented by tape set up as circuits that the hackers must re-wire as combat rages around them. It is interesting to observe their focus as they struggle to finish the puzzle while fighting is happening all around them. They are just as crucial as the fighters in these situations (perhaps more), and the fact that the puzzles they are working on are physically representative of what they are doing adds to the ease of immersion already created by the emotional stakes.

Occam's Razor (Darksteel Games) has a similarly impressive representation of their technology. As a modern game with cyberpunk elements, incorporating technology into their game is important to maintain their genre. To this end, one of the staff members has written small apps that can be installed on various devices and then interface with receiver devices on modules. Hacking is simulated by an app with various functions and puzzles that the players must solve to interface with the technology. This creates an interesting split as, even when these modules contain combat, hacker-type characters have tools given to them by the staff that make them irreplaceable. The fact that the puzzles are so evocative of the real world counterparts adds to the ambience and allows the game to retain its immersive feeling.

Immersion is very important to boffer games. Working to include more immersive non-combat modules is a sometimes tricky but ultimately worthwhile goal. There seem to be a few key threads that weave through non-combat modules that engage players and leave them feeling like something from the module stayed with them.

One such commonality is emotional tie-in for the players. If there are peace talks, the players must have strong feelings about a particular outcome. If a non-player-character is the focus of the module, the characters must have some emotional investment in that non-player-character, be it firsthand or otherwise. The more narratively built up a scene is, the more powerful the emotional payoff will be. Making sure that players understand the consequences of their actions, both in the short and long term, adds to the drama of the scene, the emotional investment of the players, and the overall payout of the scene.

The conceit must be given that most of the time, combat will still be an option within any given scenario no matter the original intent. Part of the freedom of boffer LARPs is that sometimes players will choose to turn a non-combat module into a combat module by deciding that it is time to begin attacking everyone. As the old adage says, no plot survives contact with the players. Even in a module wherein a fight with the guards of a vault should not be winnable, the guards should have full stat blocks in case of player-character failure or player-characters trying to push their luck. If there is no way for peace talks to devolve into war, it will still heighten a scene if the nobility in question have bodyguards to stand with them. It adds to the illusion of the world and weaves a fuller and more realistic picture as well as an edge of danger that will better grab players.

There are many players that just want to live in the world that the staff have created. They like to explore, learn the stories and lives of the non-player-characters they encounter, and learn as much of the world background as they can. These types of players frequently enjoy opportunities to immerse themselves in parts of the world and show off their own personal skills. Giving players an opportunity to solve plots with unique and unusual skills will add to their experience. Giving them fleshed out non-player-characters to talk to and learn about the world from will add entertainment that can't necessarily be gained from just combat.

It is important to remember that in these games, players frequently consider violence to be their first option. It is seen by many as the go-to solution to many kinds of problems. When a module is properly configured and violence is removed as a possible solution, it forces players to adapt or react in ways that can be very powerful. It is sufficiently rare that creatures cannot be fought that such encounters are memorable. Rendering a character who is normally very physically inclined helpless, assuming that the player is fine with being in such a state, can heighten the experience. Suddenly that character is forced to struggle through figuring out another solution. This is one of the ways to force a character to grow and confront parts of themselves they might not normally engage with, and thus is a very powerful tool.

Working with these concepts can help push a non-combat module to the next level, and help the players become immersed in the world that is being created around them. The more commonly-accepted and talked about such non-combat modules become, the more likely the community is to gain players who are interested in things other than combat. Broadening the appeal of live-combat games to include things other than live-combat creates a more inclusive and accepting hobby as well as one with more universal appeal. It helps draw in players with unique skillsets that can help enhance the experiences of their fellows by bringing fresh points of view and exciting new stories to tell. As writers and players, we can and should embrace this direction of storytelling, blend it with established conventions, and create exciting new adventures.

LARPs Referenced

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