Panorama: Above All Else

Panorama: Above All Else is a fantasy RPG that gets it's inspirations in play from artwork, which creates a vibrant world in which envoys and spies travel across the world to make gains for the factions to which they are loyal. As these characters galavant about, we learn their place in the world and what's important to them… and what they're willing to do attain their desires. All this as the world grows in detail about them.

Rules

The following rules pertain to all phases of play.

Action: Character Creation

A player may interrupt play at any time to create a character.

Step 1: Present an Image

The player should present an image of the character in question. The player must make their selection of this image before they opt to take the character creation action so they do not delay play, presenting the picture at the moment of creation (do not say you're creating a character and go out looking for an image for the character). The player may name the character at this time, but this is not mandatory.

Step 2: Imbuing with a Trait

Intrinsic to creating a character is imbuing them with at least one trait with a trait score purchased from the Character Points on a one for one basis. So if a player wishes to give a character a “Strong” trait, they might spend 10 points to make give the character “Strong 10” (which is considerably strong, but not amazingly noteworthy). The player may give the character as many traits as they like all at once, as long as they have the character points to buy them.

Rules: Characters

Control

Creating a character gives the creating player control over that character (and thus answers all questions about that character). This control is sealed by spending character points on the character, making control irrevocable. A player may not create a character who is an expert on your character, in other words (see below).

Expert Characters

A character is an “Expert” in any field of knowledge that they have a trait for, so long as there are no other characters who have a higher rating with with that trait. This essentially gives the player who controls the character control over any images for which the GM rules this character is the Expert. The GM will rule that only one character is the Expert for every image for which a question comes up (and thus give that player control over the answers).

Action: Developing Characters

Once you've created a character, you can add additional traits with character points to them at any time, in exactly the same manner as the initial trait. You may also increase the number of points in an existing trait, thus “revealing” that the trait was more potent than we were initially lead to believe. This can even represent characters not being fully aware of their own level of ability.

At some point you may wish to telegraph that you are at an end of the revealing of the ability level of a trait. This is good, because uncertainty about these things can become tedious after a while. This is referred to as “capping” a trait, and if the trait is over 20 points, the player receives a reward of 5 character points for doing so. Mark capped traits with an asterisk after their actual score. Note that the trait can be increased in the future, but only as the result of some sort of in-game training or other method of increase (most importantly, it can't happen in the middle of a contest).

GM Trait Limit

The GM may never add a trait to a character with a rating higher than 50, or increase a trait above that level. Note that GM's may create monsters and such with higher traits as obstacles for characters, but the notion is to allow for players to have characters who are the “best” at human scale activities of particular sorts, if they so wish. Thus no human character will have a “big” trait that makes them larger than a dragon; but they may have a Swordsmanship trait that's higher than any other human has.

The rare exception to this rule is in the case that all of the PCs have capped their level at less than 50, at which point the GM is allowed to add that trait at higher than 50 to other characters (essentially the players have abdicated that trait to the GM characters).

Action: Player Character Selection

A player may, at any time, interrupt play in order to propose adoption of a character as a “Player Character.” A player character is one that the player will control in terms of actions during scene play (all other characters actions are directed by the GM). The player should then make their case for why they want to play the character, if they so desire. Once a player proposes a character as their PC and makes their pitch, all participants (all players and the GM, as well as official audience members) vote on whether or not the player should get to play the character in question. In the case of a tie, the GM casts the deciding vote.

A player may do this again later in play if they want to switch characters, and the same process is used. If this happens, the previous character reverts to being a GM character.

The GM, as controller of all non-player characters, may not perform this action.

Note: Early Adoption

Consider early adoption of PCs carefully, as it's often better to see how the situation of play evolves so as to have a PC whose interaction with the situation in question is enjoyable. On the other hand, if you have your PC early, you may be able to maneuver the situation into something that works for the PC; so it's not a terrible choice. Just keep your PC in mind during situation creation if you create them before that occurs.

Setup

Option: Assemble Art

One of the participants of the game (often the GM, but this is not necessarily the case) may create a set of art to work from for the world. In doing so, this participant will have a strong influence on the content of the game, especially in terms of what they do NOT include. Pinterest and such sites are of great utility should one decide to create such a set.

If nobody does this, then the set of art in use is essentially everything available on the internet. This can lead to a lot of disconnected elements entering play, but some groups may enjoy this approach.

Character Points

Participants (including the GM) begin play with 100 Character Points, which are used to imbue characters with traits as detailed below.

Phase 1: Seeding

A player should be selected to be the record-keeper by consensus. If possible a wiki is an optimal way to keep such notes (or other inter-linked medium). This player should probably NOT be the GM if at all possible. Players should do their own data entry on things they create when they can… the role of the record-keeper is to ensure that players do this, and to do it for them when other players cannot.

Step 1: Seed Image Selection and Presentation

The first mandatory step of play should be the participants (GM included) perusing the set of art to get a feel for what's available. This should be done prior to the first session of play. Each participant should select three pieces of art that they feel capture something that they would like to somehow be central to play, and have links to them available when the first session starts (or printouts, if preferred).

These images are referred to as Seed Images, and players who bring them are said to have control of

the meaning of the images, at least to start. Once everybody has gathered, each participant should look carefully at all of the seed images presented by all of the other participants. In the unlikely event that two participants bring the same image, they both have control of that image, and must agree to all answers (until and unless an Expert Character is created to take control).

Step 2: Seed Image Inquiries

The participants establish an order of play by any means they like (simple clockwise player order around a table, typically), and then select somebody to begin. That individual selects a seed image they find interesting, and comes up with a question to ask the controlling participant, something regarding the image. These questions should reveal interesting and play-oriented details about the pictures. The participant in control must answer the question, but they can ask for suggestions from participants who did NOT ask the question, if they don't feel that they have a good answer at present. Participants should not give suggestions unless asked, though they can indicate that they have what they think is a good suggestion (again, the asking player should not be involved in this process at all). In the end, the answer given is selected by the participant in control.

Rule: No Answer Forthcoming

It may occur that nobody has a good idea for an answer to the question asked. In this case, the answering participant must decide if the question was an interesting one or not. If it was, then the answer to the question may be termed a “Mystery” and left unknown, if that's at all plausible. Otherwise the player who asked the question may be required to ask a different question. This continues until a question is asked, and answered.

Note: Good Questions

Good questions will not only resolve issues regarding the images in question, but also to similar images that may be in the art set (especially if the player thinks they might introduce such images later in play). So if there are lots of orcs in the set, and a player has a picture of an orc village, a good question might be about the origin or nature of orcs in general. Other good questions will answer questions about the nature of play of the game, such as how the PCs get around the world of play, or what sorts of dangers typically await them.

Step 3: Rotate Play

Once there is an answered question, play rotates to the next participant in the order, who must ask a question, per Step 2 above.

Ending Phase 1

No more than two questions may be asked about any Seed Image during this phase. This means that eventually there will be exactly six rounds of questions asked. Once these rounds are complete, Phase 1 is complete, and play should move on to Phase 2: Situation Creation.

Notes: Character Creation

Players may elect to do this during the seeding phase, because in doing so the character may well be an Expert on a subject that pertains to one of the seed images. This gives the player who controls the character control over the answers to questions about said image. That said, obviously another player can create a character who is more of an expert at any time to take control back. Also note that a player can only have one character be their “Player Character” and that you may not end up with the character you've created for this purpose as your PC (see Action: Player Character Selection above).

Phase 2: Situation Creation

Players select images again, and link these new images to the extant info created in phase 1, and to each other, with some of the linkages being contentious to create political situations. Keep going until the GM feels they have enough to work with.

Phase 3: Scene Play (Main Phase)

The GM is no longer limited in number of character points (but is still limited to no more than 50 points in any trait).

GM sets up scenes. During scenes characters may have conflicts. Conflicts have various dangers (see Schema), some obvious and some not. If a player wins a contest, they roll the schema dice as normal. If they lose the contest, they roll only 2 dice instead.

Rule: Conflict Resolution

Characters accumulate action point totals by invoking traits. The side with the most trait points at the end of bidding wins the conflict. Which traits are usable is up to the GM, based on player description of their character's actions.

Penalties

Often a situation will not be optimal for the character for some reason, and/or a trait may not be the perfect fit for a conflict. When this is the case, the GM may impose penalties of any level that reduce the player's action point total.

Fate

Sometimes things work out better for one character than another, abilities aside. After all bids are in, if the contest is still close, the players may wish to bid “Fate.” Each player writes down a number of character points in secret, and then reveal them. Each player gets 4 times the amount of Fate bid to add to their action point total. The winner loses the character points they bid, but the loser does not.

Rule: Adding Elements

A player may add an element to play at any time by presenting an image (in much the same way as they present a character image when creating that image) of something that one of the characters in a scene sees, discusses, or to which they are close. They must then select a player to ask them a question about the image, which they must answer (or call a mystery if appropriate). If they cannot do this, then the element is not introduced into play.

The player must enter the successfully introduced element into the record of play. For their efforts, they get one character point.

Rule: Linking Elements

A player may find a link between two elements in play at any time. They must get another player to ask a question about the link inspired by the art on one or both of the cards, which they must answer (or call a mystery if appropriate). If they cannot do this, then the link between the elements is not created.

The player must enter the information about the linked elements into the record of play. For their efforts, they get one character point.

Rule: Reputations

Every trait actually has two ratings. If the trait is listed with one rating, the character has a “Reputation” with that trait equal to the trait level. But in some circumstances, the character may have less reputation with the trait; this perhaps most commonly occurs by the character traveling to new places, but there are many ways it can happen. Also under certain other circumstances a player may have a higher reputation for a trait than the actual trait. If the reputation for a trait is other than the actual level of the trait, then the trait should be listed with the reputation following a slash after the actual rating. For instance, if a character has Strong 30, but is thought to be Strong 60, then they would list the trait as “Strong 30/60.”

Starting Reputation

Unless a player states otherwise, the global reputation for each trait starts at the same level as the trait. If somebody knows the character, they have a good idea of what the character is capable. A player may opt, however, when revealing a trait for the reputation of the trait to be any number less than the actual revealed level of the trait, representing the character being a relative unknown in this field, or perhaps other situations as might be indicated under Losing Reputation below.

Using Reputation

Reputation is just like any other trait, and can be used wherever the GM will accept it. Often reputation can often be used to defuse conflicts, by threatening to bring traits to bear that should defeat the opposition. When this occurs, the conflict to decide if the conflict is avoided is performed

as normal, but the character uses their reputation instead of the actual trait. Often it's better to be feared than actually have to demonstrate ability.

Identity

Note that if a character hasn't established their identity, then they can't claim the benefits of their reputation, of course. It may take a demonstration of some trait in some cases for a character to establish their identity, if they are known for having a particularly high level of a trait. On the other hand, sometimes a trait will declare itself unequivocably, like a “Big” trait. This is also a way for characters to assume another's identity, and thereby their reputations…

Gaining Reputation

The most common way to gain reputation with a trait (when the reputation is below the actual level of the trait) is to accomplish a feat using that trait in a way observable by witnesses. The level the reputation increases to depends on the nature of the witnesses. If they are unreliable, it's possible that no reputation will be gained at all.

If they are reliable, but have no traits related to the feat or understanding how it was accomplished, then the level will increase to one higher than the level revealed by the opposition. Note that this may well increase their reputation higher than their actual trait, unless the character makes a successful effort to convince the witness that they are not that good. In that case, the player can select whatever level of reputation they like for the trait in question (often the actual level).

Obviously having a reputation for having a trait that's higher than you actually have may be an asset at first… until somebody makes you prove it. Being found out as having a trait that's not as high as your reputation will tend to get you a reputation as a Braggart (see below).

If there is a character who has a trait level higher than ten less than the final amount bid by the character, then the amount bid will be the amount the reputation goes up to. If this is not their full actual trait level as revealed before, a trained character may note that the character was “holding back” making the actual level uncertain.

Players may, of course, later reveal a higher level of a trait for the character (whether established previously or not), which may result in the reputation going up further (this is known as the “I am not left handed” rule).

Losing Reputation

When entering a new area, where the character is unknown, most of their reputations will effectively be zero, until they have gained reputation per the above process. If necessary, this can be noted by a third notation after another slash after the character's “Global Reputation” (which, after all, doesn't go down just because the local yokels haven't heard of the character).

Another way to lose reputation in a trait is to lose a conflict to somebody with a lower level of that trait with a reputable, but unskilled witness to view the proceedings. Under these circumstances the level of the trait's reputation is lowered to one less than the level of the trait of the character or obstacle who defeated your character. Possibly less if the defeat seemed somehow particularly

ignominious. Note that this can result in the character acquiring a Braggart trait, as below under bragging.

This can even happen with a skilled observer, if the character doesn't reveal their full level of ability in a conflict. Though if the observer is particularly skilled, they may observe the fact that the character is “holding back” at which point the reputation becomes somewhat in question… but the reportable level is what's used in any reputation conflicts until such time as a higher level is pinpointed.

Bragging

Any character can claim that they have a trait level that is at any level they choose. A conflict can be performed to convince another character that the claim is real, in which case, the reputation level is set at whatever level the character bragged about it being for purposes of reputation conflicts with that character.

If a character then has their reputation reset by a conflict, or either of the situations above occur under gaining or losing reputation that set of being a branded a braggart, the character gets a braggart reputation. The level of the reputation is equal to the difference between the level that the character was said to have previously, as compared to the level revealed (which, it should be mentioned, may be less than the full level of the trait for the character). Or the reputation is set by the entire level of the “false” reputation if the character does not accept a challenge to prove the level.

The character's level of Braggart is subtracted from all of their other reputations for purposes of conflicts of reputation. If a character is caught bragging again later, then it goes up the difference again (though since the braggart rep is lowering their level of rep already, this is often less than otherwise, and may be zero… they already expect this level of bragging from the character).

A bragging level can be reduced by a conflict about this if the character never actually bragged about it, by pointing out that the previous level of reputation was created by an unskilled observer. Though if the character knew about the reputation, and didn't do anything to try to adjust it back to the lower level, then they may still obtain the braggart reputation (even if they actually have a higher level of the trait, but just didn't reveal it all).

Endgame?

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