A Role in All D&D ‘Mini-games:’ Baseline Batter, Burst Better, and Situationally Better Characters

Designing Salt in Wounds character customizations has me thinking a lot about tabletop game design. Specifically, how D&D has multiple mini-games included in the ‘meta’ game, and how hard it is to design and balance for them all.

First and foremost, is the ‘game’ of combat; the overcoming of dangerous opponents through force of arms or force of magic. This is the most common ‘game’ within D&D (at least at the tables I play at) and this is a game that all player classes can specifically function in ways that are fairly easy to understand. (As a corollary, understanding how a character class operates in this game, i.e. what their combat abilities are, is the part of the character class description that receives the most attention/detail.). The other mini ‘games’ within D&D however are a little harder to balance and have historically been the domain for one of the characters to shine (at the expense of others).

First, there is the social mini-game, where (commonly) rather than stabbing someone you attempt to get them to come around to your way of thinking by careful application of words. This is interesting because –while there certainly rules for these encounters- in my experience they function much more like a live action improve between the GM and the players. This is interesting I think because the players who have a higher ‘real life’ charisma usually do better here, in a way \*much\* more pronounced than the relative combat advantages afforded to someone more tactically skilled.

In addition to the social ‘mini-game’ there exists a variety of ‘skill’ mini-games of which stealth & exploration are the most common. In these games, you usually have a single PC (rogue for stealth say, ranger for tracking an enemy) who makes a series of rolls to complete a challenge. However, even moreso than the ‘social’ mini-game, this can devolve into the ‘rogue show’ where most the PCs have nothing to do while the stealthy character makes a series of decisions. Even as someone who is a fan of sneaky, tactically surprising play on the part of the PCs, I’ve considered houserules banning rogues and/or the stealth skill generally simply to ensure there’s no large chunks of gameplay wherein most players don’t have agency but instead are forced to wait for some other PC to resolve their ‘area of expertise.’

The other minigame is of course puzzles and wonder/discovery, challenges or encounters which don’t have stats involved but instead rely on creative problem solving (riddles, or logic puzzles like pushing a series of switches which change the colors of a dragon statue’s scales).

Balancing characters, so that they all have a role in ‘all’ minigames (instead of just a specialized combat role) is something I’ll explore more fully in next week’s post.