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and more

THE BONES

US AND OUR DICE

Foreword by John Kovalic
Edited by Will Hindmarch



“A book of gamer joy.”

—Ryan Macklin, Lead Project Developer,
The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game

What are these small, insignificant things—these dice—and why do they disturb us so, with their vertiginous surplus of meaning?

This isn't just about percentiles and probabilities. It's about late-night game-ending rolls where everything hinges on that climactic moment when one single die skitters across the table and determines the fate of a hero, a city, a *kingdom*...

“Come on, natural 20! Daddy needs a new sword of wounding!”

This is about about gamers, camaraderie, and memories where they meet: our dice.

DICE MAKE US CRAZY

DICE INSPIRE US



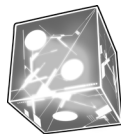


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THE BONES: US AND OUR DICE



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FOREWORD

JOHN KOVALIC

When you come right down to it, few ideas are strong enough to last countless millennia.

Walking upright. Hunting. Gathering. *Dice*.

Dice have remained virtually unchanged in both form and function since the dawn of recorded history. Oh, sure, binary lots have been replaced by flipping a coin, and knucklebones are now the sparkly four-, six-, and twenty-siders that gamers covet and coax at the gaming table, like tiny lovers, both beautiful and unfaithful. But dice are dice, and nothing's taken their place in about 12,000 years.

Which came first: gaming or dice? If the jury of anthropology is to be believed, dice preceded actual gaming (as we know it) by leaps and bounds. Indeed, it gets worse for the games themselves: it is probably no coincidence that many of the rules that early dice were used for are long-forgotten. Yet the dice remain, near-timeless artifacts – reminders that at our core, we're not so incredibly different from our gaming ancestors.

Did the ancient Persians have favorite knucklebones? Were there Romans who moaned “by JOVE, I always roll a *monas*! Why do I always roll a *monas* when I need a *tetras*?”

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Alas, the answers are lost to history. Yet the fact that neither seems so far-fetched tells us something – both about dice *and* about ourselves. The person who, in 2003, paid nearly \$18,000 for a second-century Roman icosahedron at auction would probably have done well to find out beforehand if the original owner considered it a lucky d20 or an *unlucky* one.

Which is it better to be: lucky, or good? Nobody who has ever owned a Crown Royal bag chock-full of d4s, d6s, d8s, d12s and d20s (with the occasional D30 and D100 thrown in... *just because*) will hesitate with the question at all. Look how quickly those shiny new six-siders are relegated to the back of the gaming closet should they – Shock! Horror! – disappoint their owner during that one critical round of combat in *Warhammer 40,000*.

Ask almost any gamer, and he or she will have yarns galore about the dice: good rolls, bad rolls, disastrous rolls (perhaps making for the best tales of the lot). Stories of hitting that magical saving throw remain etched in our memories for decades, and gain near-mythic status. Board- or miniature-gaming equivalents of the poker player’s “bad beat” are told with palpable *pain* in the voice. If you think roleplayers can go on about their characters, you should hear them yak when it comes to their beloved polyhedrons.

This is a book about dice – the “bones” of the title – and in it, you’ll discover that there are probably as many views, stories and thoughts on dice as there are gamers themselves. Each one of us knows we’re just one roll of the bones away from glorious victory... or ignominious defeat.

Cherish this little book. Hold it close to your heart. Love it, and care for it... almost as much as, say, your dice.

Your sparkly, sparkly dice...

John Kovalic
October 2009
Madison, WI

INTRODUCTION

WILL HINDMARCH

THIS BOOK WAS SUPPOSED TO BE about how dice make us crazy.

You're sitting there waiting for your next turn in *D&D* and you're rolling your damage dice over and over, to see how they're doing. To get a sense of what result they're going to give you. To see which way they're leaning tonight. Because, you know, that's how dice work. Dice make us crazy.

You accidentally drop a die on the floor and it rolls a natural 20. "Damn," you declare, "I just wasted a perfectly good roll." Because, you know, that's how dice work. Dice make us crazy.

You avoid challenging the campaign's big villain, putting it off to another night, because you've been rolling lousy all evening. Because, you know, that's how dice work. Dice make us crazy.

Take this excerpt from the blog of game designer Fred Hicks, describing what he calls "the best d20 die I've ever come across," the d20 from the *Torg* boxed set:

So what makes it special?

[T]he die is psychic (or, as Rob Donoghue put it, dramatic). It *knows* things. This is not a die that you roll simply because you're looking to get a 20 consistently. The

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Torg die does not yield to such whims. Instead, it tends to produce dramatically appropriate results. In a GM's hand, it rolls high when the players are getting cocky, and low when they're trying to squeak out a victory. In a player's hand it yields criticals when the time is *right*.

Psychic. Dramatically sensitive. Charmed. Call it what you will.

It is the holy flippin' die of *Torg* and, no, you may not touch mine.

Hicks even keeps a shrink-wrapped copy of the game, just in case it contains another incredible die. Dice make us crazy. Wonderfully so.

Putting this book together, it became quickly clear that dice don't simply make us crazy. We're already crazy. What dice do is influence us. For good or ill, we give those little polyhedral ne'er-do-wells a measure of power over ourselves. We assign them numbers and we listen. We ask them questions and we trust their answers.

Louis Zocchi (rhymes with *rocky*) is a founding father of American dice manufacturing. Zocchi's been in the polyhedral business since 1974, which means he was right on the RPG hobby's forward edge. Speaking of edges, take a gander at Zocchi's dice-manufacturing spiel by searching for "Lou Zocchi" or "Game Science" at YouTube. I'll never look at round-edged dice the same way again. As Zocchi tells it, all dice should be like casino dice, with sharp, crisp edges "so that they will surrender a uniform amount of energy as they galavant across a tabletop."

Ever seen those 100-sided dice that look like textured spheres inside of clear orbs? Those are called Zocchihedrons – Zocchi invented them.

Lou Zocchi is crazy about dice, but in a good way. He's not crazy about dice the way I am. He's not irrational. He just wants dice to give us "equal access to all the digits" as they're supposed to. It's what they're designed for, right?

Dice are tools.

Word is that Starbucks has dice with things like "mocha" and "grande" on different faces, to use as training tools. (Starbucks declined to comment on this rumor when I asked about it.) Roll up a random drink order and see if the trainee knows how to put it together. I wish

they'd been doing that back when I was a nascent barista – I'd have geeked what fierce over the combo of coffee and dice.

Look at J.S. Kingfisher's "musician's dice:" twelve twelve-siders etched with the chromatic scale. (When you read the phrase "chromatic scale," did you picture the lizard-like hide of *D&D*-style dragon? Then welcome home, nerd.) Those dice have the power to inspire music. Yet I'm sure that some music student somewhere has sat there rolling, hoping for a note, cursing and re-rolling until those dice, in their chaotic, cosmic authority, dole out a *G#*. Sure, he could just write it down, but that would be cheating.

Our notions of how dice behave seem to be something we have in common. Our ability to appreciate the little flights of lunacy that dice inspire certainly is. I believe this is something we have in common across the breadth of the world and through the depths of time. I take solace, somehow, on those nights when I can't roll a coveted number on any die, in the image of ancient gamers pleading with their dice, in the torchlight, at the feet of great guardian-bull statues.

I suppose it reminds me that the dice don't have it in for me. Rather, at one time or another, they've had it in for all of us.

So it's not that dice make us crazy. I was wrong about that. They drive us to take action. They provoke things and settle things. They give us access to a decision-making power outside of ourselves, like tiny secular oracles.

They inspire us. Read on and see how.

A RANDOM HISTORY OF DICE

KENNETH HITE

BECAUSE IF WE DON'T start with the Einstein quote, you'll just be marking time until we get to the Einstein quote, we're starting with the Einstein quote. Which isn't quite the one you're thinking of, because he never said it, or not quite. What Einstein said (or rather, wrote) in 1926, instead of "God does not play dice with the universe" was: "I, at any rate, am convinced that He does not throw dice." The "He" in question being "the Old One," which was Einstein's way of referring to God, or the Aquinian Prime Mover at any rate, and although my subconscious itches to remind me that H.P. Lovecraft was writing "Old Ones" into "The Call of Cthulhu" in 1926, that's probably a coincidence. What Einstein was saying was that all this quantum mechanics business was maybe a nice way to get some pretty math done, but it couldn't amount to anything real in an orderly world. Which may not be the Single Wrongest Thing Ever Said (Or Rather, Wrote) By A Genius, but it will do until a better example comes along.

Here's how wrong it was: Ralph Waldo Emerson knew it was wrong. The great Transcendental windbag, the Deepak Chopra of 19th-century New England, got it right, and Mr. E-Equals-Emcee-Squared bobbled it. It's enough to shake your confidence in an orderly world. Maybe even enough to make you take up quantum mechanics. Emerson said, in

1841, “The dice of God are always loaded.” Which, to be fair, he basically ripped off (without attribution, may I add) from the Greek tragedian Sophocles, who wrote “The dice of Zeus fall ever luckily,” or in our own argot, “Zeus rolls behind the DM’s Screen.” Which may explain how Zeus got Heaven when he “threw lots” with his brothers Poseidon and Hades to divide up the cosmos. In short, we (or rather Homer) can almost say that the gods literally did play dice for the universe.

I say “almost” because Homer wasn’t talking about dice, specifically, but about *astragaloi*, or “knucklebones,” so called because they don’t come from the knuckles at all. Properly speaking, the gambler’s knucklebone is actually a “hucklebone,” meaning a bone from just above the heel of (usually) a goat or a sheep. (Antelope *astragaloi*, we are assured by leading authorities, “were much prized on account of their superior elegance.”) Per the *OED*, gamblers’ usage shifted from the obscure “huckle” to the more familiar “knuckle” around 1750, although knuckles – and even whole fists – were probably used to resolve dice games much earlier (and later) than that. For instance, Homer, to bring him back into this paragraph again, tells us that as a young lad the hero Patroclus (Achilles’ future life partner) killed someone in a fight over a game of *astragaloi*. More important than the *astragalus*’ relation to sheep feet, or even heroic homicide, is its relation to dice. *Astragaloi* naturally have four faces that can land upright when tossed (and two rounded edges that don’t), making it nature’s own four-sided die. So in sum, *astragaloi* aren’t knucklebones or dice, except that they are.



Sophocles, he of the accurate assessment of God’s dice, ascribed the invention of *astragaloi* to the Greek hero Palamedes as a means of killing time during the Trojan War. (This either makes the Trojan War casualty Patroclus very precocious or makes Sophocles very bad at reading comprehension, but let it pass.) Herodotus, by contrast, said that the people of Lydia, in what is now western Turkey and what was then far-western Persia, invented dice to distract themselves from a great famine. (As opposed to modern gamers, who use Doritos to distract themselves from both famine and dice.) Plato, meanwhile, said that the Egyptian god Thoth invented dice, and *petteia* (board games with