The Legend Begins…

'Ah…' Sighed the Old Master. 'So you seek the one true way?'

'To go where there is no way. To make your own path.' The young disciple replied without blinking.

'So you have seen through the illusion. After only a decade. You are wise indeed.'

'Master my eyes were shut but now they are open. Tell me of the legend of game design.'

'Ah. The Legend of the Four Things.'

'Do you mean five rings?'

'Silence foolish one! The last thing I need is trouble with the Olympics. I'm trying to run a mystic dojo of game design. Do you know what those overheads run to?'
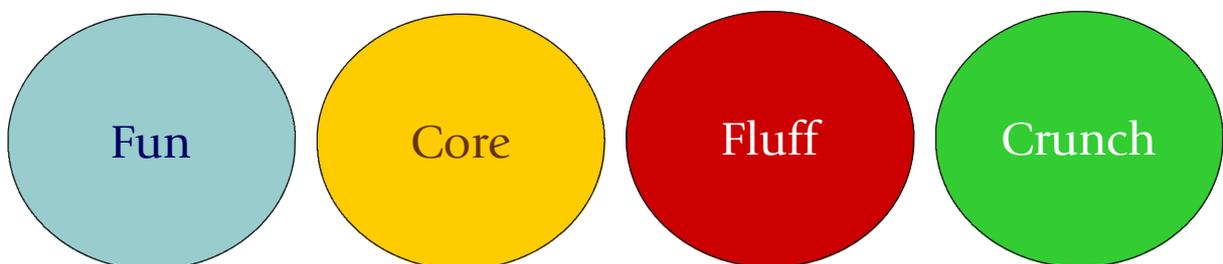
'Um, anyway about those four things.'

'Ah...The Four Things. The Core, the Fun, the Crunch and the Fluff. They are four but must strive to be one. The one true way of game design. The Wao.'

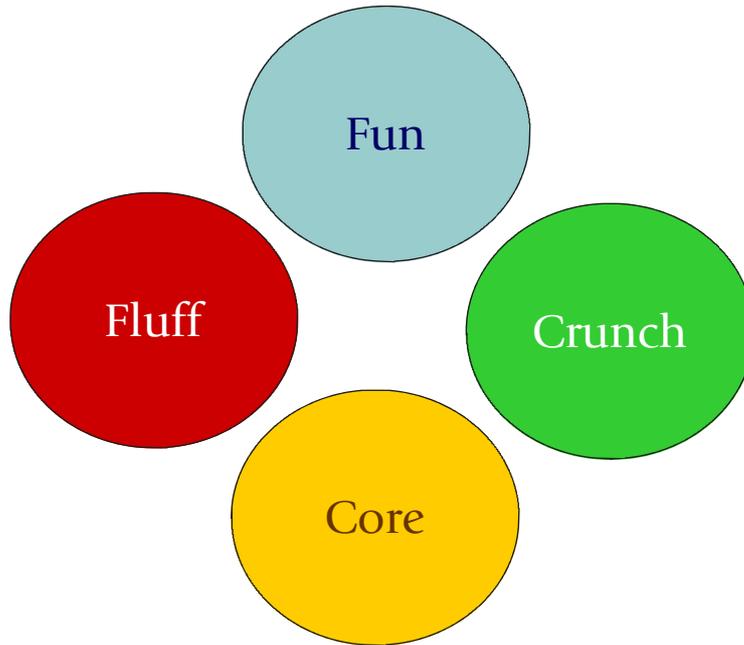'But I thought the one true way was to find your own way-'

'Quiet you - I'm explaining The Four Things…Visualise them as rings.'
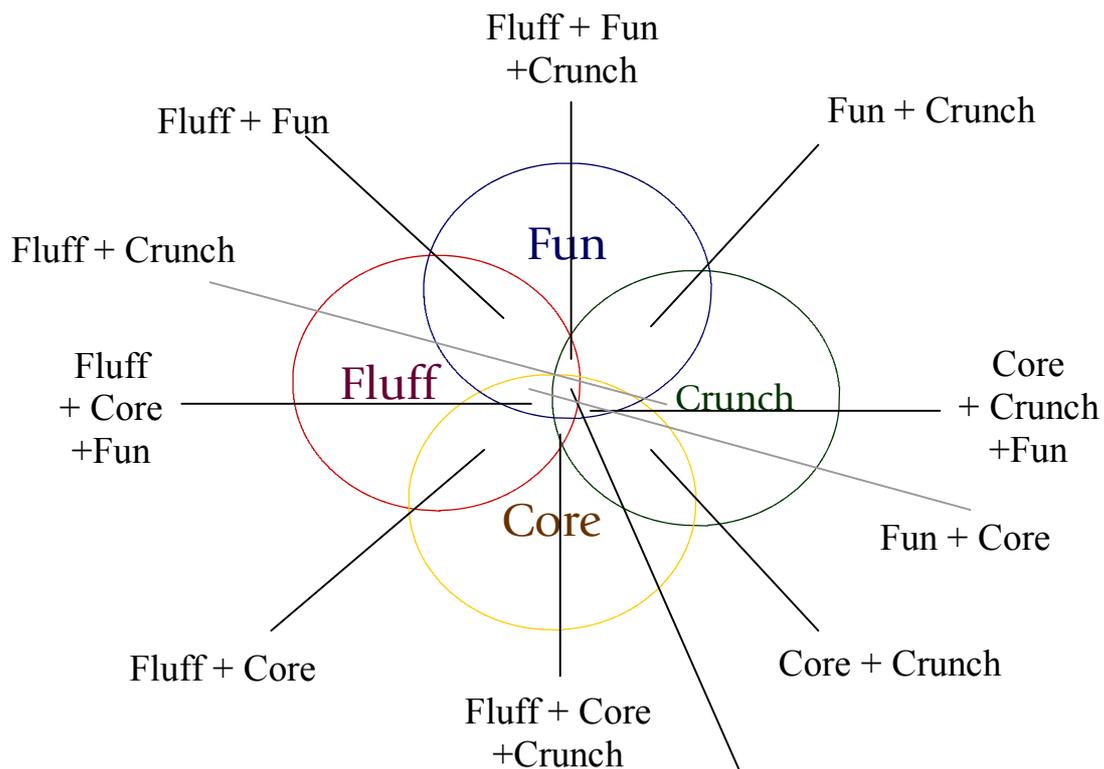
'You're pushing it now.'

Fun   Core   Fluff   Crunch

INCOHERENT DESIGN.
The four things have no interaction.

Fun

Fluff

Crunch

Core

NORMAL DESIGN.
The four things have 11 distinct interactions.

Fluff + Fun
+Crunch

Fluff + Fun

Fun + Crunch

Fluff + Crunch

Fun

Fluff
+ Core
+Fun

Fluff

Crunch

Core
+ Crunch
+Fun

Core

Fun + Core

Fluff + Core

Core + Crunch

Fluff + Core
+Crunch

i-form. - All things in harmony.
Fluff+ Fun + Crunch + Core

IDEAL DESIGN.
The four things are in total harmony.
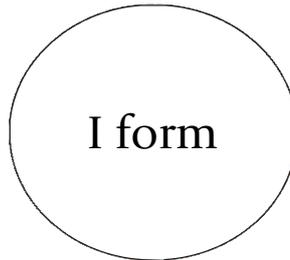
I form

i-form. - All things in harmony.
Fluff+ Fun + Crunch + Core

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4 Things:

Fun   - Why we play.
Core   - That's what its all about!
Fluff   - Where we play.
Crunch   - How we play.

6 Double interactions:

Fun + Core   - Delight in premise
Fun + Fluff   - Entertaining fiction
Fun + Crunch   - In the game
Core + Fluff   - Heart of the fiction
Core + Crunch   - Sell it some more
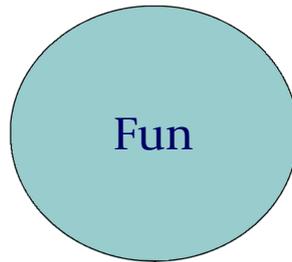Fluff + Crunch   - Gaming the world

4 Triple interactions:

Fluff + Fun + Crunch   - Great but where's the premise?
Fun + Crunch + Core   - Good game shame about the setting.
Crunch + Core + Fluff   - Works but no fun.
Core + Fluff + Fun   - A freeform triumph!

1 Idealised form:

Core + Fun + Crunch + Fluff   - Wao! Bingo!

FUN

Fun

People role-play to have fun, that's the point. So a well designed role-playing game or entertainment (RPG/E) will be fun to play. Unfortunately, as a designer you can't just write "and then the players have fun." Nor can you tell the players how to have fun, they already know what's 'fun' for them. No, instead your game needs to guide them to the fun. Show, don't tell.

When it comes to fun, you can't please everyone. There's no point trying. Instead, look at the different types of fun role-playing engenders and decide which you want to concentrate on. I work from the six flavours of fun outlined in GENIUS theory, but I'm open to new types of fun being suggested.

Gaming - competition, tactics and analysis are fun.
Exploration - exploring a fantasy world is fun.
Narrative - stories are fun.
Immersion - acting is fun.
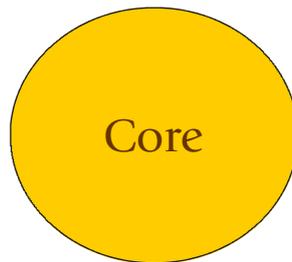Unity - camaraderie is fun.
Smiles - you can have your own miscellaneous fun too!

You can't write fun. Instead, when developing each of the other three things: Core, Fluff and Crunch - one needs to consider
- Why is this fun?
- How is this fun?
- Can I make it more fun?

You want to make sure the group is having fun *because* of your RPG/E design - not despite it!

CORE

- The Core is:
- The heart of each game.
- The central premise
- The point
- What makes your game unique
- What it's about.
- How it all hangs together.

You should be able to summarise the core in a sentence, if not your design is already in trouble…

It's often helpful if your core can be phrased as a question - E.g. *How far will you go to get what you want?*
From Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer.*

Core can incorporate theme and genre but does not have to - there are plenty of generic role-playing systems, although they tend to have weaker cores.

The first thing anyone will say when they see the core is: **'Where's the fun?**

The core must interlock with the fun to provide delight in the premise of the game. There needs to some sort of universal appeal, a wow factor. However, as not all people like the same sort of Fun you're probably best off targeting a certain niche.
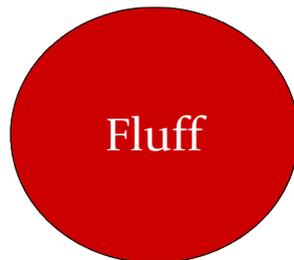
Sample (vague) Cores:
- Beat the other players.
- Kill Things. Take their stuff. Go up levels.
- Explore your dreamtime.
- Collaborate to create a narrative of artistic merit.

What's a good Core?
Something that excites and enthuses you. Something you feel passionate about. A game that needs to be played!

Core
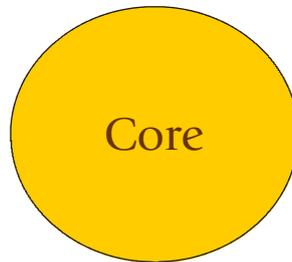
FLUFF

Fluff

- Where we play.

"In fantasy and science fiction gaming, "fluff" is often used to describe the fictional background created for games. The opposite term "crunch" is used to refer to the games' rules."
- Wikipedia

Fluff means anything recorded about the game that isn't the rules. Fluff describes the specifics of the fictional game world, and the genre.

The amount of fluff per game varies massively. It's possible to have a good RPG/E design without any fluff - instead the players are encouraged to build their own world. Yet many of the most successful RPG/E systems have extensive fluff. The fluff to crunch ratio should be carefully looked at in any game.

Rating the quality of fluff is difficult, because there's a big variation in personal tastes. High realism to high fantasy to high-fantasy-realism, phew.

We can consider how the fluff should interact with the other Things. In idealised design, the fluff will:
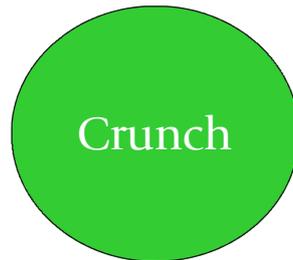
Entertain. People should want to play in your world. Exploring the dream should be fun.

Support the core. The setting should provide an appropriate backdrop to explore the premise. The core should be at the heart of the fiction.

Fluff can also represent a learning curve to new players, how much about the world do they need to know to get the most out of playing?

Fluff
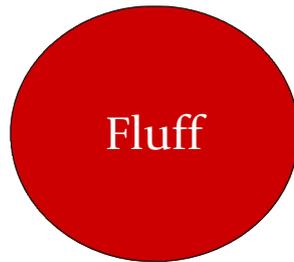
CRUNCH

Crunch

- How we play.

"The crunch! How dare you speak of the crunch! You know nothing of the crunch! You've never even been to the crunch!"
- Saboo, The Mighty Boosh

Crunch refers to - the mechanics, the rules. As you might expect when it comes to the crunch it's crunch time. That is to say the crunch actually defines what the game is, since all games are described by their rules. The crunch *is* the game. Crunch, crunch crunch.

"You've had your first slice of crunch. I'll slap you with the crunch. I'll bury you in the crunch"
- Saboo, The Mighty Boosh

Good crunch is all about providing meaningful player choice, which promotes fun, emphasises the core and supports the fluff.

Delight gamers. Playing the game should be fun. Work out which flavours of fun you want the crunch to facilitate.

Reflect premise. The crunch should bring the core issues to the centre of play.

Model the world. Keep the crunch in synch with the fluff. The crunch needs to support the fluff but also master it. Crunch supersedes fluff.

Crunch consists of three real world factors:

Mathematical factors: Karma to Chaos.
These relate to anything numerical determining the direction of the story. Mathematical factors form the basis of most role-playing games, often expressed through dice rolls. There are an infinite number of potential mathematical factors. However, all mathematical factors exist on a continuum, from total order (karma) to total chance (fortune). Whereabouts on this scale you set the various mathematical factors will greatly affect how the system plays. One thing to consider is that in pure karma systems there is no tension when a mathematical factor comes up, it's resolved instantly - win or lose.

Skill factors: Expertise and real world skills.
Expertise relates to how well players can stack mathematical or group factors in their favour. Basically, how much system knowledge is advantageous in maximising player effectiveness to manipulate the story. Expertise can be thought of as a learning curve of crunch. Any designer should carefully consider the gradient of this crunch curve. A shallow curve will help new players get into the game. But many gamers get a lot of enjoyment out of developing knowledge of the (mathematical) crunch and using it skilfully during play.

Real world skills are a different category. Real skills can be built into a games crunch. In this case a players real world ability will determine how they can affect the story. Real skills are seldom used in tabletop rpg design, but are worth remembering.

Group factors: Meeting of the minds.
Role-playing, by it's very nature, is a socially constructed activity. As such, ultimately everything comes down to the will of the group. The narrative is jointly created for the pleasure of the group. Within that remit, there is massive scope for negotiation - the players are the only 'end users' of the story as well as it's authors.

How many group factors can actually be written into a game design as part of the crunch is debatable. There will always be a group dynamic between the people playing and this will always impact at some level upon the game.

The most popular way to deal with group factors is to award one player special status as Game's Master, Godot Monkey or referee. This player then becomes the ultimate authority on the group's game. This gives one individual infinite resources and the ability to overrule the crunch or fluff as they see fit. It's common to refer to this force as GM fiat. Consequently the burden of responsibility falls squarely on the GM's shoulders and the group's game often becomes the GM's game instead. This can be good or bad in practice, but from a game design point of view it's pretty bad because it relies on an individual rather than the rules as written.

Balance

Good crunch must be balanced. Balanced crunch grants all players an equivalent amount of potential narrative effectiveness. Often this is achieved by ensuring PCs are equal in terms of mathematical factors. Conversely, un-balanced or 'broken' crunch can be exploited legitimately by resourceful players to allow them to dominate the emerging narrative. This can become badwrongfun - that is fun at the expense of others' fun, resulting in a net fun loss. Many a system has made the mistake of letting it's crunchy bits run away with it into a crazy un-balanced state and then look imploringly toward GM fiat as a way of cleaning up the mess...

It seems there needs to be some way to reconcile group factors and mathematical factors, so that every player can contribute effectively to the narrative. I'd also suggest that good game design shouldn't allow players to ignore the crunch as written because making all the game rules optional seems bizarre - how can it even be called the same game?

The Legend endeth

'So…' Repeated the Old Master. 'Now you know of the Wao. The Legend of the Four Things. '

'This is the key - all elements in harmony.'

'Indeed.'

'Hey - do you fancy a game old master?'

'A game! And less of the old. I don't have time to play games. No I'm just going to sit up here and contemplate the void. That's what it's all about. One day I'll write a game the likes of which you've never seen.'

'When?'

'When the time is right. When the firebird rises in the east and the ancestors whisper to me like lotus blossoms tossed on the wind.'

'When?'

'A week on Thursday.'

'Well I'm off to play my new rpg - it's ace, a swashbuckling samurai version of Watership Down set during the Russian revolution called Bolshevik Bushido Bunnies go Berserk.'

'Can I play Bigwig?'

'Yup'

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By JJ Prince