Thoughts on, and personal critiques of, Blades in the Dark

If I had to put it in a single phrase, I'd say that I don't hate Blades in the Dark. I've had a good time playing it otherwise I doubt I'd have gone almost a year without getting somewhat burned out on it. On the other hand It's also not my favorite game, far from it, and It has some glaring flaws in how it's supposed to be run that I'm not sure if I can chalk up to how I'm running it or how my players like to play their games. But how is it supposed to be played?

The book lays out the premise and the ideas of what Blades should be quite clearly I believe. Blades is a game about playing a crew of criminals in a fantasy-steampunkish setting where there are ghosts and vampires and magic powers and old/dead gods while there is simultaneously an industrial revolution of sorts going on in this Victorian city powered by said old gods. It's extremely upfront about this, but that's pretty much all you get out of the setting. The players start off as a fledgling gang of criminals in it to win it and make it big in the underworld. To do this they'll have to seek out opportunities to make money and advance their reputation by taking on powerful gangs, and also advancing whatever personal goals their characters have (if any).

On The Setting of Blades

Personally speaking I think it's a fantastic setting, in both meanings of the word. Does it make sense? Probably not. But it's cool. I thought that when I picked up the book, and my only complaints are that there just isn't enough background. Granted this is a pretty big complaint, since one of the points of feedback that I've gotten is quote: "The setting just doesn't make any sense", In what was a supposedly unintentional blow to my ego from Wilson. The main gripe that I can't recall verbatim were that in this shit sack apocalyptic setting there really isn't any reason why the city would be consumed by crime and corruption because surely the citizenry and government would band together to drag humanity from the depths or something along those lines. If he wishes to explain himself he can do so in the post script.

I split this criticism between myself and the game roughly 30/70. I'll fully acknowledge that fleshing out settings and giving background details and world building and making settings pop is easily my weakest point as a GM, to the point that it's laughable. A good 80% of the fleshing out of the setting is done in between sessions when someone just asks me about it. In game it just doesn't really come up naturally for me, and only happens when I write out some explicit piece of exposition because I've been dwelling on the fact that I don't good descriptions of the locale.

If I were to be charitable towards myself I'd say that most of my time gets consumed by hashing out the actual things that are happening in a given session of play, and that means I tend to assume that the others are "seeing" the same things I am unless given the impression otherwise, in which case I'll elaborate on the background. I've heard this criticism called "The White Room", in which one's descriptions are so lacking that the audience has no choice but to imagine that all the action in a scene is taking place in a blank featureless room with the objects described thrown around willy-nilly until they're relevant for the story. I think I've gotten better at this since when I first started a couple years back but it remains a weak point.

To get back to the original point, that's why I put 30% on myself. The remaining 70% handily goes to the book for simply not having world building that holds up to the barest of criticism and "scientific interrogation", and yes I hope that my disdain can be heard through those scare quotes (look in the back of the book it straight up says not to read too deep into the setting). I'm going to make a list and go over the points that I think make the least sense, yes from a science nerd's standpoint, so in no particular order we have:

The Sun is gone from some magical catastrophe

As much as I think this makes the setting fairly unique, because fuck everywhere has a sun, one must acknowledge that holy shit this is a huge can of worms to open up, and also a massive barrier for someone to overcome in their suspension of disbelief. It just opens up too many questions that the games setting either refuses to answer or does so in a half ass way.

What do people eat?

Okay mushrooms sure, how do they grow what they eat? There's no fucking sun.

Is this entire world a frozen hellscape? If not (I haven't run it that way) how the hell is it not?

Are there even plants in this place? Probably not yet we have parks and shit?

Shouldn't everyone be malnutritioned as shit?

What kind of animals exist again? Goats aren't goats, uh there's rats and dogs and shit but how are they still kicking?

No seriously how isn't the world frozen over? What was the sun for if life can just go on after it is destroyed?

Oh yeah, and here's another good one: What even happened to destroy the sun? Fun fact the game doesn't tell you. I had to take it upon myself to come up with a halfway decent sounding story that mostly complies with the lore of the game and the random stuff that John Harper has said about what inspired the game. He claims it to be from a previous high fantasy game he played in the past but

we all know that he just really liked Dishonored. I'm not going to touch on that point again but I swear to God there's a case for a lawsuit.

All of those questions that I asked rhetorically aren't even some meticulous deconstruction of the game that I've pored over to make this as damning as possible. I just sat there for 5 minutes and rattled off the first questions I had about the setting.

Due to aforementioned catastrophe, the dead don't stay dead and rise as ghosts

This is the one I think you can give the least shit to be frank, likely because in a freak coincidence it's the most fleshed out part of the setting. We have the lightning barriers that keep out the ghouls. We have the Sprit Wardens who track down possible ghosts and put them to rest in a bad ass ghost incinerator. There are magically enchanted spirit bells to detect deaths, and crows which laser seek to dead bodies. All of this builds up into a setting where killing is taboo and generally considered the last option people want to take.

Oh wait no, that's also something that I extrapolated from reading the book. Duskvol supposedly doesn't give a shit when bodies start stacking up despite it being an existential threat. I guess sacking a rival drug dealer is just that important?

This is one case where I think looking to my players gives a better insight than rolling around in my own thoughts. None of them have given a second thought or batted an eye to icing someone who gets in their way, save for the fact that it gives additional heat (which is a purely mechanical concept, and if it existed in other games without ghost shenanigans It would still be the case) and even then that cost usually just gets eaten. Sure it raises the default consequence of "The Spirit Wardens Show Up", but that's never actually been relevant since most of the time they just leave after shooting someone. The game could be taking place in Everycity, Forgotten Realms and the attitude towards death wouldn't change a bit.

Is this my doing? Frankly I'm leaning towards no If I'm running the game by the book. Absolutely nowhere in the 80 some pages of lore at the back of the book does it ever describe there being some taboo against killing. I mean fuck I just looked at it and it states the exact opposite. The criminal world of Duskvol is a kill or be killed environment where motherfuckers die every day in horrific ways in order to preserve the status quo. An explicitly stated cycle of violence and death encircles the city.

I don't think It's unreasonable to make the assumptions that I did about the setting given the information we have about how ghosts and death works in the setting, and I'll fully admit to agreeing with Wilson's critique on this point. It just makes no goddamn sense. You're telling me there isn't even the slightest taboo or inkling against killing because of the implications it has? I mean shit if you want to think about it like the psychopaths my players are, a man locked in your basement cant tell a soul what they know, but a ghost can. It's a plot point in the crows foot scenario that Rorick's ghost might know who whacked him.

I'm faced with the realization that I completely made up the admittedly flimsy and hardly relevant canon I had regarding the people of Duskvol's attitude towards killing. These guys don't give a fuck. Whatever, I'm ending this point.

Duskvol is a crime infested city where criminals control the streets and nothing is really done about it by the authorities

Easily the most grimdark and pessimistic part of the setting. In this ravaged world people are still crooks and murderers and willing to backstab anyone for a buck.

Yeah sure, I present the entirety of human history to support his claim.

To actually address the point the main criticism I've heard regarding this is that it doesn't make sense that people aren't unified and banded together and generally not tolerant enough towards seditious behavior to allow such a city as Duskvol to be so consumed by the violent crime which ultimately will be the downfall of the city. The unfortunate part is that to answer this question you either have to engage in a lengthy dialogue regarding the nature of humanity that will ultimately go nowhere and leave people with sucky feelings, or you can just take it for what it is.

Ultimately the game needs a city consumed by crime with a flourishing underworld. Why? Because the presence and tolerance of crime makes crime easier, and the entire game is about being criminals. Is this a cop out? Yeah it kind of is, it doesn't tackle the root of the issue about how things go this bad. The game doesn't give a shit, and pretty much tells you in the describing the game section at the beginning of the book that if you don't buy into this premise then you're not gonna have fun playing the game. Ultimately if you bounce off this point I don't think there's any coming back. This also isn't an essay about human nature. Moving on.

Returning to the main point...

Those three are the hardest selling points one could make for the game. Now It's time for me to be upfront. I don't particularly care for the nitty-gritty of them. When presented with a fantasy world, I generally accept it as is so long as it's internally consistent. The world has no sun? Okay sure, the fact

that a story is being told means that people have found a way to go on. The dead don't stay dead? Okay sure, that's an interesting catch that will surely have deep implications in the setting (yeah right). The city is consumed by crime? Okay sure, let's see how our characters choose to navigate this extraordinarily hostile environment and make it big.

Absolutely none of the hows and whys of those three points is ever explained, aside from the mushroom bread bit but that raises even weirder questions about how feasible that is. At the end of the day the setting is sparse and filled with enough rule of cool to power a Japanese mecha. This doesn't matter to me in the slightest. The only time those details have ever come up is when there's pushback by the players against the setting for not making sense, and by extension me to make it make sense. I don't want to, to be perfectly honest. I'm not here to come up with a convincing alternate fantasy universe with a cohesive and well thought out answer for all these questions. I'm here to find out how the gang makes this score the biggest one yet with fireworks and chemical weapons and mass civilian casualties that nobody actually cares about (which is it's own thing but whatever).

I think this is part of why I liked running Delta Green so much (hey first time that name has popped up so far won't be last) since the game is pretty much set in modern times with mostly modern problems, and also old gods bent on destroying the universe. The things that didn't make sense weren't supposed to make sense and It was my cue to ask them, "yeah that is weird you should find out why". There isn't a hell of a lot of world building you have to do when you tell them day 1 that it's a game set in America in the early 90s. Everyone has a general idea what that means and looks like and there wasn't really a lot of nitpicking and raising questions that don't matter (tilt-up concrete construction has existed since the early 20th century, *Spencer*, nice try).

But why did I ramble for nearly four pages about how the setting of blades doesn't make any sense If I'm going to follow it up by saying I don't give a shit about setting coherency? Aside from just saying it to say it because admittedly I do care a smidge for stuff like that. The answer to that touches on something that will likely occupy an entire chapter of it's own, that being expectations going into a game and how important it is that people are upfront with what they want. It's communications 101 and yet I'm left with not much to work with after trying to open up communication channels. I think that has to do with both myself and my group so far not having played enough games to really know what we want from a game. With some back of the napkin math I've spent a total of 100 hours or so behind the GM's screen, so I'd like to think that I know what I'm looking for when it comes to playing a game.

And what would you know it that sounds like a great segue into talking about actually playing the game!

On The Philosophy of Playing Blades

Three words: Fiction. First. Gaming.

This sounded like french when I first read about it in the book. What the hell does it even mean? Is it just some jargon that was invented to sound cool, and doesn't actually mean anything? As much as I'd like to make that joke it actually does have what I consider a fairly concrete meaning. To do that I'm going to go over what the actual structure of play looks like in an RPG in extremely general terms. To be frank It's probably fine skip this if you've ever played a session but I'm going to write it down for my own reference later.

An RPG begins with some kind of stimulus provided by the GM. The GM prompts the players with some kind of new information about the setting that they didn't know before, and either implicitly or explicitly asks the golden question, "what do you do?". I love this question by the way, you can say it in so many ways to say, "I'm thrilled to see what you're planning to do", and, "You're completely fucked and you should just give up but lets see what happens", and dozens of other meanings.

That aside, after this initial exposition, the players then respond with some kind of fictional action that their characters would like to do in the fictional setting. Oftentimes this will have some kind of explicit mechanic such as an attack roll to see if your sword cleaves the goblin, but sometimes it's as simple as stating you'd like to strike up a conversation with the barkeep and pelt them with some questions. The GM then responds with a reaction that the world gives based on the players input, which loops back around to providing exposition, which creates a lovely little loop that ends up persisting until the end of the session, or the unfortunate case of the game stalling for some reason.

Cutting out the fat

What Blades and other fiction first games want the players and the GM to do is to throw aside the mechanical connotations that exist by the very nature of the RPG being a game with rules. In some games Billy the Human Fighter™ has a movement speed of 35 units, and Billy's player will make decisions based on this strict mechanical limitation. And yet what are the rules for (you get a cookie if you can predict what this example will be) swinging from a chandelier with a blade between your teeth and plunging into a melee? In nearly every classic system the GM would shudder with horror at the thought of coming up with some kind of ruling to cover that case, with likely thoughts of, "How will this impact game balance going forward? Will this table develop a chandelier meta?".

Even more likely than that is the player not even considering that to be an option, because there's no shiny button on their character sheet labeled chandelier swinging. Or again, even *even* more likely, the player considers that any additional complexity they add to their action will result in an additional dice roll being made. Not only do they need to roll for attack, but now the GM calls for an Acrobatics roll to grab the chandelier, and if they're an asshole maybe an Athletics roll to even jump. The player rightfully decides that's too many points of failure to just look cool, and decides to spend their 35 feet of movement to calmly walk down the stairs into the brawl and make a normal attack roll.

Enter Blades in the Dark (although most RPG scholars consider Apocalypse World to be the first "fiction first game" but I haven't played that). Blades would take one look at the above scenario and decide that instead of getting lost wading in the swamp of determining mechanics that suit each and every individual minute action, one should "follow the fiction". The fiction here is simple. Billy is throwing himself into danger like the reckless fighter he is, and making a bad ass entrance to boot. That exact "action" is when Blades says the conflict resolution system comes into play.

One doesn't roll for jumping and hanging and swinging and then falling and attacking in Blades. Actions in blades are basically akin to a clip from a movie about a character doing something cool or suspenseful. The goal I believe being to cut down on the tedium of throwing dice, and make picking them up meaningful, since for the better or worse something interesting will be happening.

Throwing out the baby with the bathwater

Fiction first also means disregarding mechanics that are currently detrimental to the state of the fiction. At this point the game starts to lose me, I'll admit, It's a difficult concept to wrap my head around.

I like to think about game mechanics in a sliding scale of applicability. All games have some kind of core mechanic involving dice that most everything else builds off of. D&D has roll 1d20 and add modifiers to meet or beat a DC. Delta Green has roll d100 and meet or go under your skill. Blades has create a pool of d6's and mediate degrees of success on the failure, success with consequences, success, critical success scale.

However in addition most games will have specific rules that cover certain situations. D&D says that a character can do a standing long jump some amount correlating to their Strength, Delta Green says that if a character catches on fire they need to succeed at Dexterity checks to put themselves out. These are specific scenarios where the game designers said that there is a right way to look at and overcome this specific challenge. Blades is no exception to this. An engagement roll is made of a pool of dice from fairly specific circumstances which decide how difficult the beginning of the Op is. Reducing stress as a downtime action says that you roll your worst attribute score as a pool and take the result. Hell if we want to look even deeper the game says that there are in fact distinct phases of play which have different mechanics governing them, those being free play which leads to a score which leads to downtime which loops back into free play. The book is quite explicit about which mechanics are supported in these phases of play, and when they all come into effect.

Now here's the screwy part. In the very next breath the book tells you to look at all these systems and encourages you to throw them away if you decide they don't fit the current fiction. The

distinct phases with different mechanics? Actually you can kinda just wing those and not care about phases if it doesn't fit. The engagement roll? Yeah well if it doesn't fit the fiction you don't have to bother with it. Most of the downtime stuff is kept fairly rigid but hell if it doesn't fit the fiction you can throw that stuff out too.

My main issue with this is that the entire game ends up being kind of fluid and murky where there isn't really any certainty in how it should be run. It would be obtuse to claim that either intentionally or mistakenly ignoring certain mechanics isn't something that every GM under the sun has done at least once, but with most mechanically centered games there's a generally agreed upon way to play the game that simply doesn't exist in Blades. You can go onto any forum regarding Pathfinder or 5e and ask a community of rules lawyers what should have happened in a game you played recently. And while that behavior irks me for other reasons I can't deny that there's a certain satisfaction in the idea that in most cases there is a correct answer to the question of how should the game have gone in this scenario.

Try asking a similar question on a forum related to Blades. Trust me, I have. It's worthless. The best that you'll get is a dozen people each giving you two separate ideas that maybe share a common thread of logic. I've seen people advocating for removing the Tier system. For ripping out the engagement roll. For not including harm or heat as a mechanic. The key difference between this behavior and the behavior of other game communities is that you'd find discussion like that in a forum dedicated to homebrewing. With Blades this is the advice given to you when you ask how to play the goddamn game!

While everyone can agree that the game is trying to tell stories like gangster movies in a spooky fantasy steampunk world, nobody can agree on how you play it. It's such a bizarre subversion of the usual paradigm seen with people trying to hack their favorite dungeon crawler into a space opera, they fully understand how to play the game but disagree with what kind of stories it's supposed to tell, assuming systems are geared towards telling certain kinds of stories which is a statement I agree with. You wouldn't try to play a high lethality investigation in D&D just like you wouldn't expect a high powered fight-fest out of Delta Green (man how strange those two games come up so often).

Flashback to the Three Words

The more I research John Harper's Blades in the Dark and what inspired him to write the game system, the more I realize that Blades is *really* a fiction first game. Harper wrote a set of rules that approximates the game that he was running in a heavily modified Powered by the Apocalypse, in a setting that was probably just straight up Dishonored. I find this important to stress because it gives a background for why certain mechanics exist. Trading position for effect wasn't a mechanic, it was literally just someone deciding to take bigger risks for higher reward. Entanglements weren't a codified

system, it was just Harper deciding that every job would have fallback. The entire Tier system (poorly) emulates how and where certain factions will be stronger than others.

I'll go into more detail on these mechanics and my thoughts on them in the next section, but I want to stress this. It may seem like splitting hairs to say that mechanics exist to set certain procedures in stone, yeah no shit moment of the century right? But that's the thing, that's not the case in a fiction first game. In a fiction first game, the mechanics are second class citizens compared to the actual fictional story going on during the conversation. If a mechanic doesn't make sense to happen in a scene where the book says it would be called for, there is no himming and hawing and bending the fiction and character actions to make the rule make sense, it simply doesn't take place.

I want to stress that last sentence, go reread it right now, and then reread it again every five minutes. *That* is what fiction first gaming actually means. *That* is the single core resolution mechanic. It's not fortune rolls, or action rolls, or dice pools. The core resolution mechanic is coming to a consensus about the current state of the fiction. As a matter of fact, changing the fiction in order to net a mechanical bonus, a procedure that is routine in most other RPGs, is straight up cheating as described in the players best practices section. Seriously look at the "Don't be a Weasel" rule. It's literally against the rules to fuck with the fiction for mechanical advantage.

Wild.

I'll go over the implications regarding this and why I think neither myself nor my group plays well with this philosophy in a later section. Right now I'd rather switch focus to critiquing the mechanics as described in the core rule book, even though in a fiction first game what the book says is irrelevant. That should adequately prove that this gaming philosophy doesn't mesh well in my brain.

On Playing Blades

Since I expect this chapter to be dominated by my gripes with the systems mechanics and the dissonance that I feel from what's going on in the fiction versus at the table, I'll lead with some positive comments I have. Blades does a really good job at painting a story about competent scoundrels that get in over their head in a criminal enterprise. Almost all of my players look back on their characters most bad ass moments with fond recollection, as in the story they did their crowning moment of awesome and single-handedly secured the bag. But my biggest issue with blades is that this was all solely in the fiction, and that the high stakes that existed in the narrative weren't anywhere to be found in the actual playing of the game.

For me to make any sense of this point I'll need to go over what position and effect is. Personally I think the mechanic would be far better described as risk and reward, and I can't fathom why they came up with the name they did. Simply put, Position dictates how bad things will go for

your character if you suffer a consequence, and Effect dictates how much your character will achieve if they succeed. This is something that is decided before the roll is made and agreed upon by all parties. Everybody knows what they're getting out of an action and what's at stake before it happens. For the record, I completely agree with this philosophy and find no faults in it. There are very few situations that are made more interesting by people not knowing what's going on.

The Odds

My main gripe with the position and effect system is that it only gives the GM the ability to determine how risky and rewarding an action will be, but NOT how difficult it would be. At a glance one might think that risk would be taking care of difficulty, but in Blades all position dictates is the difficulty (and sort of the quantity but not explicitly) of the consequences that can be inflicted on the PCs should a complication arise.

Take a sneaky lurk in a brief example. The lurk has the exact same chance to prowl up to an old lady as they do to prowl into a highly secured government facility. Of course a Blades hardliner would say that a scoundrel wouldn't need a roll to sneak up on an old lady but just let me have this example. The only real way to make an action more difficult is to break it up via the use of clocks, which deserve their own chapter on how great they are but now's not the time. Using clocks one can increase the levels of effect needed to overcome some obstacle by more than a single action, which sort of increases the difficulty by just making you roll more often and risking consequences the whole time, and gee whiz we just stumbled on the old D&D chandelier example from a couple pages back. I've gotten to the point where I yearn to just be able to set some arbitrary numerical difficulty which corresponds to how difficult I think a task is and just lay it out.

Delta Green had a somewhat similar case with it's mechanics with a key caveat. While it's true that a player will always need to beat the same DC every time, rolling under their skill, the GM is free to introduce modifiers based on if they think a task is exceptionally easier or more difficult. This allows the player to be good at what they're good at, while still giving the GM the final say on the difficulty of their task.

If a mid-level character tackles a challenge with their core skill at 3 action dots, and doesn't do anything else, there's an 87% chance that they'll get their way. With an extra two dice from an assist and a push the odds of success in some degree jump to 97%. Barring astronomically bad luck (heh heh), failure is barely going to happen, the PCs are going to get their way. But okay, failure is usually the least interesting outcome. I've been known to narrate a failure as a fail-forward in Delta Green before where something bad happens. In Blades this is explicitly a Success with Consequences. Due to the weird math that dice pools have this option floats pretty consistently at around 35-40% odd. Generally the odds of a straight success are similar starting at around 3d6. The odds of rolling a critical

shoot up crazy high once we get to 5d6 and above but that's already a lot of dice so I'm not going to bother with that (yet, we'll get to that in the chapter covering the progression system).

Resistance and Consequences

So there are going to be a lot of straight successes, and most importantly consequences. The reason why I stress consequences is that in Blades the GM, "doing a bad thing to the players" is explicitly codified as a mechanic called a consequence. Consequences can be invoked by the GM on a failure and on a success with consequences. My issue I take with the consequence system is that it puts it into the players heads that the GM isn't allowed to do anything unless it's through a consequence. This is just a straight up misread of the rules, and the cause of much frustration over our Blades campaign, to the point that I get people calling foul on me when I have the Billhooks unleash Death Hounds in what is a twofold move on my part. I'm both cashing in on a past devils bargain (a great mechanic by the way), and also cashing in on the foreshadowing of showing that the Billhooks have control over such monstrous creatures. I personally think that including complications in the table of consequences is misleading or sending the wrong message about how reactive the GM has to be to players, and the internet tells me I'm not the only person suffering from this.

Okay, okay, lets get back on track. So the characters have astronomical odds of overcoming pretty much any given obstacle in their path, what gives? The big argument I've heard for why it still matters is that, "It's not a matter of if you can, it's a matter of what it will cost you". This is the crux of the resistance system, which essentially sets the stage for the GM to throw all manner of horrible consequences at the players, yet give them the narrative authority to resist them either completely or to a lower level. On it's face, I think this mechanic is interesting and offers choices for the player to make. Note, not the character by proxy of the player, purely for the player to choose in a meta sense, but I haven't scratched the surface of the meta layer of this game yet. Regardless, the PCs are going to succeed at what they're trying to do just looking at the odds, so what does it cost them?

If the players understand even the most basic concepts of how games and odds work they have at least three in each attribute. They have at least a 40% chance of rolling a 6 and taking no stress for this. If they have four in each attribute and the fucking busted crew ability that gives +1 to all resistance rolls then they have a 60% chance of taking no stress for resistance. So the odds are pretty good that they're not risking jack shit for resisting everything. In practice this means that resistance isn't really a choice the player is making so much as it's their default action whenever faced with a consequence. Inevitably they'll play the odds on it for long enough and then get walloped for four of their nine total stress and feel like they've been taken out by the dice and not their decision making. Personally I think that if resistance had some base cost, and much less swing then this would be less pronounced and it would be a more genuine choice on which consequences the player absolutely doesn't want to happen.

As a brief aside from purely the GM side of things, it honestly gets old to see players suffer desperate consequences and then resist all of them with five dice taking maybe one stress at most. While I'm certain that it's incredibly fun for the players to beat the odds and see the danger they might have faced disappear with little cost, at the end of it I'm left with even less material in the fiction to work with and it feels like the players can just do whatever nonsense they want against what should fictionally be overwhelming odds, and succeed brilliantly with barely any cost because of how the math works out.

Effect and the Tier system

Good grief, what a shitty system. I'm not going to mince words because this is one place that I really felt the book did an awful job with. Tier is directly tied to the effect system and governs how powerful and wide reaching certain individuals and groups are. The higher the better of course. The highest tier enemies are the ones that really control shit, like the government and the massive criminal enterprises that weave their webs throughout Duskvol.

If you read the book you could be convinced that higher tier crews are just straight up better at anything than one of a lower tier. "They just had a better breakfast". How the book lays it out is that you start with the difference in tier between the players and the target. Then you factor in anything else like outside elements, special gear, edge cases and eventually settle on some difference number. If the number is 0 then you're dead even and effect is standard. -1 is limited effect and -2 is zero effect. Getting +1 on the calculation grants great effect. As an aside, the book never tells you what exactly these effect levels give you, it's complete GM fiat what they actually mean. Good luck staying consistent on them when all you have to go off of is vibes and whatever you called great effect in the last few sessions.

So all of this combines to make it look borderline suicidal to take on larger gangs, and combined with how reputation gain works, seems to incentivize the players to pick targets more powerful than them, but that they'd still have a chance against. Okay that seems in line with the narrative idea of a gangster movie. This seems like a reasonable system.

Ahahaha you dingus you took the book at it's word? The correct answer according to the author and damn near the entire community is that tier and the effect scale is "just a guideline", and, "not meant to be taken literally". They recommend you ignore everything the book tells you about how tier is calculated and, wait for it can you guess it? You should follow the fiction. A rival crews tier *could* be their tier. But the crews gangs could be below their tier, or maybe their locks are one tier above. Why? Who the fuck knows but the end result is that the most common advice is basically just ignore tier with respect to gangs.

Sure the Bluecoats are tier III but does that mean that a tier I gang would start off with zero effect in a brawl against them? The book says yes probably barring any factors that would tilt the odds, but the community and the author himself says that fuck it unless the *Bluecoats* have a good reason to put the crew at disadvantage then put them at standard effect.

This is one point of community advice I threw in the trash after seeing how it completely makes tier worthless, and I already have enough problems making tier worth a damn in the eyes of the players. Despite raising tier improving nearly every single aspect of your gang, none of my players have bothered with raising it past tier I. You make more money from crew XP, crafting high level shit is easier, your goons and cohorts are more effective, you're odds in the effect calculations are straight up better! At this point I don't know what to chalk it up to, and the problem is that it starts to interfere with the fiction's cohesiveness. A low tier gang is barely scraping by and paying up to the big boys, and yet if the players are the ones at low tier they barely feel the effect when going up against high tier opponents and effortlessly clown on them. One of the GM's practices is to be a fan of the players, yes, but so is portray the world honestly.

Recently I've been experimenting by using more clocks in a way to demonstrate tier, and by God it gets confusing having nearly two dozen of the damn things cluttering the table. Regardless I think that high tier enemies should be reflected in difficulty to overcome them, which as I noted earlier in the essay, Blades only kind of supports by using the clocks system to force more actions to resolve an obstacle. I think that so far it works well to make the NPCs not pushovers but again, this is something that I had to experiment with to get the results I'm looking for. *19 sessions into the game.* I guess part of the, "play to find out", mentality is playing to find out how to play the fucking game, because this advice sure as hell isn't in there.

Now you might be on my ass here bitching about the community and not just taking the book at it's word. And all I can say to that is when I'm learning something the very first place I go to is somewhere I can find (probably) real people who can talk about their experiences and what can be gained from them. Call me old fashioned but getting peoples word on this stuff is important to me. It's why I find it so confusing that there's such a schism between what the book says and what the people playing the game (and writing the damn thing) are saying.

Entanglements and "Shit Keeps Getting Worse"

This is what I've identified as the most controversial aspect of the game to my players. The idea of it stems from an idea that is core to not just the setting, but also the system: Every job will have complications and impacts on the greater world, and these will make life more difficult for the scoundrels. That is the key narrative and mechanical purpose of the entanglements, things can't just go easy for the players.

Based on several interviews and feedback that I've received from my group, every single player that I've spoken to dislikes the system. The main points of feedback are that it feels punishing for no reason and generally quite dull. The latter is obviously worthless as most feedback from players tends to be, so let's focus on the former point.

If one had a GM that either refused to, or simply forgot to have gangs take action against the players outside of scores then that individual would probably have a pretty shit game. More importantly, however, that GM would actually still be initiating those actions using the entanglements system if they're playing by the book. There are only twelve or so actions on the table which is rolled on with wanted level and scales on the amount of heat the gang has. The actions are fairly general, but I believe the completely encompass the types of threats one would expect to find in Duskvol. The list includes rival gangs coming to mess with your business in various forms, the police cracking down on your gang members and even launching arrest raids, and demons and ghosts rising to cause trouble. The text of the entanglements stresses to make sure that the threats are coming from gangs and other entities that the players already are involved with to make things seem more organic and based on factions the players are already poking.

On paper these all sound great, and like they'd introduce a lot of trouble and exciting moments for the players. And yet the system falls flat. I think the chief problem is that entanglements don't feel special or interesting because they happen after every score. Every time the players do something the GM tells them to hold up, and rolls the dice used to signify how many babies worth of blood they've bathed in recently (see the section on Wanted Level), and then narrates how someone acts against them. Instead of it being a thing where the gang is interested to see how the world moves around them, it's seen as an entirely seperate act from playing the game itself, and an obstacle to slog through in order to get the game back to "the interesting parts".

Much of this combines with systems such as the entire player faction system, as well as downtime and the hidden fifth phase of play, "The XP Phase", to spur on what I call the "Boardgame-ification" of Blades, which is something I'll cover in it's own section. But basically there's a mental switch that gets flipped where the players stop thinking that they're playing an RPG and just look at the numbers and stats and whatnot, and roleplaying doesn't even cross their minds. This is the problem that the entanglements system has *in our game*. I emphasize that because, like nearly everything else in Blades, it all comes down to how the GM and the table plays things. I've heard of tables that RP every single ounce of game time in Blades, including all entanglements, gathering info, and even downtime. Those ideas are foreign to me because none of my players give a single shit about them, but that's for another time.

How would one address this problem and make entanglements something interesting that adds to the experience and that everyone enjoys? I've read some good ideas but the best one I've seen is to

have various clocks representing different kinds of entanglements, ones from the authorities, ones from other gangs, and ones from the undead, and then to have different dice pools built from things the gang is doing that might influence that aspect. When a clock pops then an entanglement manifests, but since it's tied to the fictional reality of what the player's have been up to it seems more justified.

Wanted Level and Heat

Hot on the heels of the analysis of entanglements is the system entangled with it. Wanted level and heat are related how levels and XP are. Heat fills up and rolls over to add one point to the wanted level counter, and by the books, it is incredibly hard to remove wanted level once you've got it. While it may be "realistic" in that the police aren't going to just forget about your murders once you've laid low, it does kind of fly in the face of the genre conventions of crime and gangster movies where laying low after a bad job is kind of what you do in order to "let the heat die down". I figure at a certain point if a gang hasn't done shit for a few months the brass is going to encourage the boys in blue to turn their attentions to more immediate matters, especially in the crime ridden shit hole of Duskvol.

So what is the system actually used for? By the books it only interacts with the entanglements system, which I believe to be a massive waste of potential. I've started to use heat and wanted levels in my game as a dice pool that indicates police attention or general fiestiness of the city which I believe makes fictional sense, but again this isn't supported by the book. The only thing that wanted level means by the book is that the players get the worse and more involved entanglements. Interesting to note is that the game doesn't actually say what happens when you max out heat and wanted level (I've decided that it means martial law is declared and the army fucks shit up), and also that the only way to reduce your wanted level (aside from a one off line in some other part of the book) is to roll an arrest and send a character to jail.

One could, *once again*, make the argument that the players should invent some fictional reasoning for reducing their wanted level and then act on it if they want it gone. For once I agree with this notion, and encouraged the players to make it happen through a long term project and a score in the Eckerd chapter of the game. But then again, why would they when they could instead be planning a bank heist or assassinating the governor or something like that. And the answer is that they only went and did so when they got irritated about the entanglements system, and when I started to make wanted level matter by having it influence police activity and them messing with the gang.

By necessity this mechanic is one that the players will only really see negatively, which is why I disregarded most criticism regarding it and the entanglements system. But what are you supposed to say when players insist that they simply don't want to see the mechanic anymore, and claim that it's infringing on their fun and ability to do what they want to do. This probably belongs in the section on my critique on my current table and players, but to keep it short I think that there is a mismatch of

expectations regarding what the players want out of the game and the kinds of stories the game is built to tell.

There's also something to be said for the fact that players just don't want to reduce heat. Not in that they don't want to do it because they want to see the consequences and the city fall to chaos, but that they prioritize full clearing their stress to zero after every job, and then spending coin and rep to advance their long term clock to learn the Royal Guard style or some shit. When the players have all this cool shit they could be doing in downtime, why would they want to spend an action on something that isn't related to them? It's almost like the Bystander Effect where everyone assumes that someone else is going to do it so they're going to spend their actions on things that directly benefit them. I don't really think there's a way to "fix" this behavior and the only way they'll figure it out is if you, rightfully and fully supported by the games mechanics, have the heat come back to bite them in the dick and mess with them.

Downtime and the phase structure of play

I think there is no greater failure of the Blades rule book than describing the phases of play the way they did. It gives people (me very much so included) a skewed vision of how the game is supposed to be played. I generally open up a rule book and expect that the way the book tells me to run a game is how it should be played, and I've already kinda addressed this complaint, but Blades expects you to read between the lines.

The phases of play go like this: Excepting anything else the players are in free play, the sulk around in free play until they find something they can make money off of. This begins the "not planning phase" where the players desperately fight there desire to plan out the job and just jump into it which is the engagement roll. The engagement roll signals the beginning of the score, and players muck around in there until they accomplish their objectives. When the score phase ends the game transitions to the downtime phase and stuff like money, heat, entanglements, and player downtime actions are resolved. Once the downtime phase concludes players are spit back into free play to do stuff.

Sounds nice and simple and clearly defined, and if you're saying this about Blades you should reread the section because you probably misinterpreted something. In this case I read the section that said, "the phases are not rigid and meant as guidelines", and said OK sure. I didn't realize that they *actually* meant it. This is about the point where I realized I was getting really sick of having to constantly read between the lines and divine author intent with every single fucking rule in this game.

As an aside, I really understand now when I heard other GMs say you either love this game or hate it. Honest to God I'm starting to lean towards the latter opinion the more I ponder on the game. I think that if you truly embraced the mindset of fiction first gaming, and kept everything fast and loose,

and your players were cool with it, it would be the smoothest game in the world. The problem, as I'll address later, is that our table doesn't follow those principles, and doesn't like the idea of keeping things loose. There's a hard mismatch between what our table wants and what the game provides.

Back to the actual point, downtime how I've experienced it is a drag. Since I've run it at the end of a session, and more importantly right after the score, the energy is on a big downswing and nobody want's to do anything that isn't just crunching numbers and spending resources. There's an argument to be made that having downtime at the beginning of the next session would alleviate this issue with player energy, but I think that for my current table the damage has already been done.

Nobody at my table sees the downtime actions as anything more than push button and pay costs to receive some mechanical bonus. After all, if the players don't give a shit about what happens in downtime then why wouldn't they turn it into one big spreadsheet exercise? Why bother narrating what you're doing in a vice session, and making a scene out of it? At the end of the day it's just an opportunity to regain the resource they spent in the last score.

It's snooty and elitist to say that there's a right and a wrong way to play a game right? If everyone is having fun then there's no harm. I think there's a much stronger argument that the wrong system for a given group can certainly mean that they're not having nearly as much fun as they could be having playing something else that caters to their tastes. For about the third time in this essay I'm going to save this for the later analysis of my current play group, but I'm going to be upfront and say there's a large schism between my players, in that half of them couldn't give less of a shit about RP on it's own merits and prefer to play with a mechanical focus, and the others want to engage in RP and go out of there way to create opportunities for it that may at times disadvantage their current character for the purpose of drama.