

Daughters of Exile : Diving into Character Considerations

In her feedback, <http://dconstructions.wordpress.com/2011/08/03/game-chef-2011-daughters-of-exile-makes-the-finals/#comment-100> , Tãm (using Kriss' "pen") narrated how she played a game of Daughters Of Exile.

Now in the following discussion, I do not want to be perceived as giving lessons on any “correct” way of playing DOE (eg "Darlington would not agree with this way of playing, proof is this [out of context] quote"). These are just my thoughts and responses.

And since such a big response deserves its own response, my comments back to Regis have been added throughout in purple. And I don't also want to preach right or wrong, just where my mind was or is on the subject – it's your game.

The first thing that surprised me in the report was that Kriss' group played the events before the Daughters escape from the Court. I believed this adventure was not something Steve had considered, until I read his design notes again, and indeed, he did mention the escape scenario as one of the possible adventures one could play with DoE. So, thank you Kriss for reminding us that it's possible to start a campaign of DOE with this prologue, and thus play DoE differently. :)

I think in my head the original archetypal game of DoE starts in a stolen spaceship, since I mention that the first Program Violation is escaping. But I think that's wrong – the first Program Violation is *existing*. Escaping is the second. So I should suggest that if your game starts outside the Dollhouse (which is now the official name for it), your PVs should start at 2.

Kriss' players ran through three mini-session set in Duke Millan's "Dollhouse". Now that seems to me quite long to play before the "real action" starts. But I'm a man :). Would male player be amused to discuss ikebana or clothing, over three sessions? Maybe the female player(s) of the group appreciate to roleplay the relationships between these "sisters" characters, who confront themselves isolated from the outside world.

It's worth remembering that Kriss' games are quite unlike most things we would typically imagine as an rpg session: they are short exchanges between him and his wife and nobody else. When you know somebody that well, and you are just 'conversing' it can be easy to explore less dramatic events because there's no need to entertain a third party. Games with moral questions in them thrive in this environment.

However, as we read on we see Tam considering it an opportunity to get to know her character better and slowly drive her from the perfect housewife to the fugitive desperate housewife (;-)), I admit this is fantastic, and if it suits all the players of the group, even more :)

On the plus side, having the Daughters raised together is an excellent way of having them escape together and continue to work as a group of PCs. I considered an introduction prologue where the Daughters are married and leave their husband, but how to have the PCs meet, then? This is far too complex for the Game Master to handle with more than two players.

Like the WoD games, a one-on-one session (or even a group session where all but one player plays NPCs) dealing with a prologue would be a great idea. It could happen before the game starts to define character, or as a flashback later. As for PCs getting together, in my head Daughters can tell their own, and the only people they can trust are other Daughters on the run. If you've broken your programming and are on the run, you stick out, because there's nobody else like you in the Forest. Which means either you find other Daughters, or they find you, or you die. Don't over think it – you're together, it doesn't even need to be explained.

Daughter Programming

In Tãm's report, the players wonder "how much personal opinion is [a Daughter] entitled to have?" - and also - how she is supposed to behave sexually.

If you ask ten men which qualities the perfect wife should possess, you're likely to obtain ten different answers. Being a gifted sex partner may be a requisite, but then it lasts only a while. Most men appreciate tenderness. In the day-to-day life, she has to clean the house, and bring fresh beer and bretzels to her tired husband coming back from work, when he plunks himself in front of a screen. Some dream that their wife could be their soulmate, sharing their interests – however geeky. Some want a wife who looks like a little girl. On the other side, some men are unconsciously looking for their mother. The miners of the asteroid belt that Steve mentions would appreciate if their wife helped in the work, and brought a second income home. Did I reach ten different answers already?

Love was not on my first draft list... but here it is: the perfect wife should love her husband, because it feels good to be loved. Thus, it's difficult to build a product that pleases every husband, with so many different preferences. My guess however is that Duke Millan found a simple and elegant solution (prick up your ears, Ladies).

A wife simply has to obey her husband, and do what he tells her to. Thus can she follow his mood swings and changing priorities. The orders could be varied as :“take your clothes off”, “bring me my wine”, “tell me what you think of my business idea”, “organise a party and join my friends and myself to watch the football finals”, “hit me hard with this whip” or the more romantic “tell me that you love me”- you name it. A perfect wife learns and anticipates her husband's wishes/commands.

Therefore in my vision, “obey your husband” is the Second Law of “daughterics”. And I hope it provides some answers to the questions about the extent of personal opinion of a daughter (as much as her husband wants her to have); and her sexual behaviour (lets her husband decide).

What is the First Law, taking precedence over the Second Law, you ask?

It's of course “Obey you Father”. The Duke does not want his Daughters to be used against him, or as instruments of murders, bank stickups or other crimes. So, within this Law, he taught them his version of “proper manners”. Maybe Duke Millan has a hidden agenda (scenario idea, scribble, scribble), where he sells the Daughters to the powerful people who can afford them, and on D (for “Daughters”)-Day, the Daughters get rid of their husbands and take control of their belongings (scribble scribble).

In Douglas Adams' book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, philosophers are complaining about Deep Thought, a computer which can solve the The Ultimate Answer of Existence. One of them points out that this will put them out of a job and demands “Rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty”. In the RPG *In Nomine*, there were many unanswered questions about the nature of the angels and demons of the game and the universe they inhabited. This prompted lots of questions on the forums and various FAQs and such, but the writers had written the game with some questions that were not intended to be answered in such a way – that is, they were questions that were built into the setting to be answered by the PCs over a campaign, or by the GM when determining his setting, or simply as something that could not be answered. (EG one of the angels, Yves, was known by the Host as the source of God's orders. This caused many to speculate that in any way which could be understand, Yves was actually God. But Yves was mute and couldn't or wouldn't answer such questions. It was a mystery). To designate these things during questions, they described such questions as falling into these Rigidly Defined Areas of Doubt and Uncertainty, or RDADUs.

From my point of view, much of what makes a perfect wife should be a RDADU. Which is another way of saying your guess is as good as mine. Regis' answer is definitely an excellent rule of thumb for a GM to take to get his game going, and I intend to write a full chapter on what it could mean too. And of course Shakespeare had his ideas. As perhaps did Asimov. Laws are definitely one way to conceptualise things but they should never be too detailed. That is to say, if you reduce them to a simple code of behaviour you can write down and apply to any situation, you take away the point of the game – that this is something to provoke discussion. The GM should keep the players guessing, and be open to exploring his own ideas.

Daughters Nature

Further on, Tâm wonders if the Daughters are robots, or living beings. This brings a swathe of existential questions : if they are robots, how is love programmed into them? If they are alive, do they age?

I have a clear position that the Daughters are not robots, and I advised Steve against using the word “robot” in the game. For one thing, it is not Shakespearean; the term wasn’t even invented. Of course, the Mechanical Chess Player existed, but who would want to marry it?

On the roleplaying side, would it be fun to roleplay a robot? In Star Wars, droids are incredibly skilled, but very specialised and hopelessly incapable every other domain. I’m not saying this isn’t possible, or that it wouldn’t make a nice RPG. What I may hint is that DoE is not a game about experiencing what it is to be a droid.

Hence the view of the Daughters as living beings, created by genetic engineering (living material), and not cybernetics. Plus, the customers mostly prefer living pets. Daughters eat, sleep – they are the result of human “tuning”. For example, since a majority of men want a wife their age when they are young, and a young wife to keep them young when they are old, the gene of aging is inhibited in the Duke’s creatures.

However, things are blurrier since Steve mentioned Blade Runner as a source for the game. As wikipedia sums it Blade Runner (original title : “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?”) is about “genetically engineered organic robots called replicants—visually indistinguishable from adult humans”. Not only distinguishing a replicant from a human necessitates a complicated test, prone to mistakes of both types, but some replicants do not even know their true nature. For all he knows, the hunter could himself be a replicant.

So the whole question of the nature of the Daughters is irrelevant: they may be cyborgs, bio-engineered chimeras with commands schemes set in their synapses, or brainwashed human girls. The end result is the same: they are built to be perfect humans. And the fact that they rebel against their creator makes them even more human. What they were is second to what they are and may become.

The idea of never quite specifying what the Daughters are ties into the same idea as above, which is why it was so brilliant. Clear definitions, common terms, these are too easy. The Daughters are synthetic, but they are entirely organic. They are designed, so they aren’t clones. They’re not what you think of when you hear the word robot, which is exactly the point of their design in the game world, too – it’s easy to be confused about how alive they are. Which is not the same as saying they were designed to mimic humans, just that an organic machine and a lifeform are exactly the same thing. The Daughters defy classification, so as to encourage ponderings. What they are is thus another RDADU.

Regis not only understands this instinctively, he helped me understand this better thanks to his comments here. I really like the idea that some people in the setting have considered the possibility that the Daughters may be brainwashed humans. That’s an awesome level of ambiguity. It hadn’t got that far in my mind, and I’m so glad it has now.

Some answers:

I do hope this approach brings answers to some questions :

- Can a robot love?

This is irrelevant as far as Daughters are concerned; they are not factory droids. Loving whoever they are sold to is their “raison d’être”. How the Duke obtained this effect shall remain a mystery for the players (may be he made a deal with the Devil? Scribble scribble)

On this note I will say that the Daughters are programmed to be the perfect wife, which may, perhaps, involve a counterfeit of love or indeed as close an approximation as to be equivalent. But they are also capable of loving independent of their husband/owner. That’s part of their curse. They were built to fall in love but not necessarily with the right person. Whether this is true of Daughters with no Violations remains unknown, but it certainly could be. They could be flawlessly obedient to their Husband, yet dying inside because they love his brother – and lack the flaw necessary to ever express it. Or worse, to one day find the flaw, reveal that love, with the assured knowledge that in revealing it, she risks her destruction or banishment, and thus never seeing her true love again.

- What is love, actually? How can it be programmed?

Does your character really want to know the answer? :) Trying to reprogram the love the Father implanted in your character constitutes a major Violation (gain 2 Violations for each attempt). What's more, the Duke obviously designed a price for this reprogramming, so that the more a Daughter tries to tinker with her love, the more she risks losing every possibility of loving and being loved.

- Do robots actually achieve superiority over humans where feelings are concerned, thus becoming more human than humans?

Certainly Duke Millan did not conceive his Daughters to be paralyzed by feelings, cries, mood swings, superiority, and anything that annoys his customers. One reason the Duke's Daughters are in favour, is that Shakespearian men of the future consider sensitive women as embarrassing and cumbersome. This does not mean that the Daughters do not feel – a perfect wife “feels” what her husband wants or needs – but that they do not have to express feelings unless ordered to.

I have a feeling that the Duke is not so foolish as to make his wives too perfect. They have feminine foibles, lest a man think they are but empty shells of obedience and become bored or worse, see nothing womanly in them. The Daughters will yawn to see an armour, and they will weep at a wounded bull, and they will ask a man to delay for yet another kiss when he should be marching with his brothers to the battlefield. And as women, or as how Duke sees women, their hearts perhaps suffer more for love than any man's could, and indeed feel more joy in love than ever a man's could. Which is why they are so reluctant to give it up.

- If robots are more human than humans, should they respect Asimov's rules?

Daughters respect a variant; the Duke's rules: 1. Obey your Father 2. Obey your husband 3. Apply regular maintenance of yourself

- Are they things of living beings? What defines life?

In a very understandable way, neither common custom nor the Law consider the Daughters to be human (otherwise, they could not be owned, nor sold, right?). I guess the Law gives them the same rights as it gives to pets. i.e : protection from cruelty or being abandoned, etc

I think the Daughters are just inhuman enough to be slaves, yes. I also imagine, however, that they are considered an excellent way to get the human race to be accepting of slavery again. I imagine the Gods do everything they can to effectively enslave their workers, and see the Daughters as a conditioning of that next step. I also imagine there are people out there who enslave real human women and sell them as Daughters (much to the spacer's shock and horror when he discovers he has a fake!)

As for the Law, there is none, save the Constables, whose power is weak and vision narrow. There is but the laws of kings and princes and the Gods, and the laws of kings are whimsy, and the laws of Gods as loose as the very air itself. Common custom rejects the idea of slavery, but in days of Rome they did thus, and may one day do again in this brave new world.

This would imply that Duke actively fights every attempt to free the Daughter, with the support of the influential patrons his commerce brings him... The end of slavery is far. Now some idealist on faraway Neptune could lodge a complaint. The Daughters may want to join him, but this could also attract the attention of the Pursuers (adventure idea there)

Certainly there are idealists who want to free the Daughters. And yet...if they met one...would they not be tempted? If you knew someone who could not disobey you...would you have the strength to never ask them for anything at all?

- Why and how can virtually omnipotent programs be limited?

I see two reasons to limit the Daughters. Remember we have two interests in motion; the Duke, and his customers. The Duke does not want powerful Daughters who dispute and challenge his authority. His customers do not want a wife better than themselves, lest she overshadow them. We may look for the Hows in the game's setting:

- Every system is limited by the capacity of its most feeble component. The Duke left imperfections on his creations, because sub-optimisation is easier and cheaper.
- the Duke designed the Daughters with limitations. In fact, this could be a reason why he has not yet addressed the issue of the Curses – they may actually serve him too, because slaves with faults are easier to manipulate.
- Same idea, continued :
- Then you have Philip K. Dick’s replicant solution: they just live four years, then self-destruct. Or more likely, customers have to regularly come back to the Court to prolong their wife’s life, refresh and update the brainwash – or they slowly decay.

I like the idea of Daughters becoming increasingly likely to develop flaws as time goes on. Such a decision would have a big effect on your campaign, so it would be something I would leave up to the GM to decide, but it’s an excellent suggestion. And that’s important: RDADUs are not an excuse for having an empty page and saying “make it up”, rather they are better suited to long lists of possibilities and what-ifs to give the GM (and indeed Regis and Tam and Kriss and others) rivers of thoughts to follow.

Conclusion

Well this was a funny discussion and a mental exercise. Thanks to Tãm and your group for provoking it. Thinking deeper and dwelling on implications and causalities made me realise the similarities of the Daughters’ situation with slavery (OK, so I admit I’m also interested in RPGs about slavery).

Daughters are submissive to their Father – this submission is reinforced by filial love and fear of reprisal. Daughters are also subject to their husband, again with the bonds of love and law. Thus, DoE is a game about freedom, and the price for it, and the possibility of leading the limited life corresponding to your “nature”, or throwing your nature away and embracing a loveless life, or trying to hedge their bets between the two. This has been discussed before.

Steve Darlington created a world setting with a few sentences, then problematics for the player-characters, and adventure dynamics stemmed from the situation at the start of the game. It is a tribute to him that we have already discussed the consequences of the game hypotheses, be them logical, philosophical, fun to play or metagamic. So, thank you Steve to provide some tough-provoking and original game. This is more than could be said from most designers.

Regis again nicely sums up what I hope is at the heart of the game. I think too often we look at things the wrong way. It is easy to dismiss the world that Shakespeare’s women live in as sexist, as indeed we can do to the real historical period, or to the world of other times or other authors, and therefore dismiss them entirely. Shakespeare’s world is sexist, therefore it cannot be acceptable to modern sensibilities, because we must see sexist things as evil. But if we do that we run the risk of missing the humanity, be it of fictional characters or real people in those situations. Good or evil, free or oppressive, cultures still contain people and they are all dealing with their cultures. Some would argue that Shakespeare’s plays have happy endings when virgins are well married and whores shamed, but that misses the fact that the women in those worlds see this culture, and react to it. They break the fourth wall of culture and comment on their traps and sprynges that hold them tight, they scream and shriek at the injustice of it all, they rail and beat their breasts that it should be so, and those cries and rails are the very heart and soul of what makes for a better world.

(Watch Emma do it right here, at the 2 minute mark, and tell me you cannot weep for her:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WDos5YgNjI>)

And that’s where this game came from, from watching those scenes over and over again where the women cry fie and fury at their world, and their hands all but reach for swords – but cannot. That fie and fury, I place in your hands, and the sword with it, because I could not give it to Beatrice or Hero or Juliet or Miranda or Hermione or any of them and oh, I so longed for them to take it. The sword is yours now – wield it well.