

# *The Best Game I Never Bought*

*By Leonard Wilson ©1995*

It was not without misgivings that I let my wife drag me off to play in the **FUDGE** Fantasy game as GenCon '93. For one thing, I'd come to make business contacts and play a few board games, not to role-play. Although I am an avid mole-player, I've never been able to work up the least enthusiasm for one-shot games. I'm a builder at heart, addicted to watching the slow growth of the PCs as a campaign story unfolds.

My second misgiving was that the ads for **FUDGE**, which announced **FUDGE** Science Fiction and numerous other types of **FUDGE** adventure sessions in addition to the fantasy, had made me group it with *TSR's* brand new **Amazing Engine**. Just one more company's attempt to hop on the universal-RPG bandwagon, head through territory pioneered years ago by games like the **Hero System** and *Steve Jackson's GURPS*. I was quite satisfied with the **Hero System**, thank you very much, and interested in other RPGs only for their ability to capture the flavor of very specific settings. *West End Games's Star Wars* and *Chaosium's Pendragon*, for instance, both seem ideally suited to their subject matter in a way that the **Hero System** could never imitate.

My final misgiving about **FUDGE** was the vision of chocolatey confection the name called to mind, while certainly more appealing than the belch conjured up by the **GURPS** acronym, was hardly the heroic image worthy of a game of high adventure.

Despite all these prejudices, I went, I played, I thoroughly enjoyed myself, and I came away with a glimpse of a product I'd never seen the like of in over fifteen years of tole-playing.

On returning home to the Ozarks, Ann and I immediately queried the publisher (*Wild Mule Games*) about obtaining a copy of the rules. It seems that *Wild Mule* was experiencing some unexpected production delays, however, because by the time it got back to us – just after the next year's GenCon – we'd written off the new company as defunct before it had begun. Happily, by way of apology for the delay, *Wild Mule* sent us a gratis copy of the rules, and I have to say it was worth the wait.

**FUDGE** lives up to every bit of the promise it showed at the GenCon preview.

What makes **FUDGE** unique is that it's not so much a universal role-playing game as a universal template to help game masters design

their own role-playing systems. The acronym stands for “*Freeform Universal Do-It-Yourself Gaming Experience*”. It also signifies the fact that GMs are encouraged to ‘fudge’ the rules whenever and however they see fit.

Surprisingly, however, the **FUDGE** rules should hold equal appeal for both the rules lawyer who likes everything spelled out in minute, mechanical detail and the devout storyteller who thinks a good rule book should be seen and not heard. The author never has the arrogance to assert that one style of role-playing is inherently superior than any other, and does a truly admirable job of catering to all tastes.

The book itself, like the rules it contains, is elegant and simple. Ninety-six pages and perfect bound, with a card-stock cover, **FUDGE** is almost entirely illustrated with public-domain 19<sup>th</sup> century woodcuttings (the one exception being the digitized photo on the cover). Unlike those gaming products I have seen illustrated in a similar manner in the past, the **FUDGE** woodcuttings are more than random filler. All have been carefully chosen and none are gaudy, abstract, or otherwise distracting. While the book is no visual masterpiece, it was laid out with an artist’s eye, and is pleasant to look at as well as functional.

As a bonus to gamers everywhere, there is more behind the simplicity of the rule book than the limited budget of a new publisher.

**FUDGE** is a freeware game. All *Wild Mule* expects to get paid for is basic compensation for the time and printing costs that went into producing the book, with maybe a little on the side to invest in publishing new products. In fact they encourage you to download a free copy off the Internet (via anonymous ftp at <ftp.cusa.berkeley.edu> in the directory `/pub/fudge/rules`, with supplementary material available in other `/pub/fudge` directories). Permission has also been granted for gamers to photocopy the book for their friends and fellow players.

The idea is to get people interested by offering a minimal-cost, high-quality game, then make money by selling adventures and other support products.

### ***Incorporating Intuition***

For as long as role-playing games have existed, they have been afflicted with the curse of their war-game origins: the tedious procession of charts, tables, and numbers that grows with every new supplement to a game as the designers scramble beyond hope to account for every contingency which could possibly arise. Even the most streamlined of the universal RPG systems either require so much math you can almost be sure of at least one miscalculation in any character you created (even if you use a calculator), or else are

impossible to play without a separate world book for each genre you wish to use.

The author of **FUDGE** puts an end to this by simply saying enough is enough, throwing all the charts and tables out the window, and starting again from scratch.

Breaking reality down into a bunch of numbers may be the ideal way for a computer to analyze and digest it, but the human brain doesn't work that way. Not one of us can eye a hole in the ground assess its width to the nearest inch, and authoritatively say, "Okay, Gwen, you've a 16% chance of jumping that thing."

As the chaos theory made famous by *Jurassic Park* says, it's impossible to account for all the variables in a complex system such as life-as-we-know-it. Despite fictitious supersleuths like Sherlock Holmes who can look at a muddy footprint and deduce beyond a shadow of a doubt the maiden name of the mother of the man who left it, humans rarely spend much time dealing in absolute, quantifiable certainty. Far more often we call on intuition to rapidly evaluate past experience and give us a best-guess judgment of what is happening around us and what will likely happen next.

It's a messy system, but it's a quick and effective one, and it's elevated us from being

second-rate scavengers to the very top of the food chain on earth. So why should role-playing games insist that we make like computers when they could be asking us to do what we do best (i.e.: make educated guesses)?

**FUDGE** allows game masters to give free rein to their intuition, and in doing so, with one, swift decisive stroke, it reduces the huge tomes of charts and probabilities into a single manageable table which could be read by anyone and can be applied to any situation which will ever arise. Yet the true magic of the system is that it does this without ever sacrificing the comforting certainty of numbers.

Unless you feel hassled by the numbers, that is; throw them all out the window if you like. The game still works just fine. Better yet, keep the numbers you like and get rid of the ones you think are a pain. The whole point of **FUDGE** is to let you create the system you and your players always dreamed about.

How it works is like this: every quality you can possibly imagine – be it something about a person, object, or a situation in general – is called a Trait. Traits are then rated on a verbal scale of seven choices which range from Terrible to Superb, with allowances made for even more extreme ratings in rare situation. This frees GMs to decide completely off the cuff how good someone is at a skill or how difficult

an obstacle is to overcome without having to do the least little bit of number crunching.

Each of these seven trait levels is paired with a numerical modifier (-3 to +3) which is used as a modifier to any result rolled on the *Action Resolution Table*. The table itself produces a number of -4 to +4, and the final result is compared to the numerical value of the opposing Trait (if the obstacle is inanimate) or the opposing Trait plus a second roll on the *Action Resolution Table* (if the obstacle is someone actively trying to thwart you). If you'd like to translate the degree of success back into words, you need only subtract the opposing value from the original Trait roll and see which level it matches.

For example: George Slickfingers, (a great pickpocket +2), tries to relieve Marla the Notably Observant (good perception +1) of the family heirlooms contained in her belt pouch. George rolls a -3 on the Resolution table ( $2 - 3 = -1$ ) while Marla rolls a +1 ( $1 + 1 = 2$ ). Obviously, George lost the resolution, since his total was lower, but how badly?  $-1 - 2 = -3$  is a Terrible result. The GM rules that George sneezed at a critical moment.

Any result which falls outside the -3 to +3 range may be regarded as really terrible or truly superb as applicable.

This then is the heart of the system and all you really have to know in order to play **FUDGE**, but the book contains more than bells, whistles and general good advice to make it well worth your while to track down a copy. It also contains some simple optional tables to help a game master do things like guide his players in building characters that will suit his campaign or developing their characters through the use of experience points determine objectively how much damage a character can take, or determine objectively how much damage a weapon can dish out.

From the simple mechanics of Traits and the Action Resolution table, the author goes on to build a game system which is complete and ready to use, yet at the same time completely mutable.

**FUDGE** breaks down Traits into Attributes, Skills, Gifts, and Faults, but Gifts and Faults are always optional and there are not set Skills or Attributes. Each game master chooses her own as she sets out to define her campaign. The book includes examples and rules of thumb to help you along, but if you're still feeling short on inspiration, no problem: just grab your favorite game off the shelf and start borrowing ideas you like. Better yet, grab several of your favorite games to you can mix and match. If you think the Social Standing attribute from *Traveler* is that game's sole redeeming feature, use it,

then move on to another rule book. If you think AD&D's weapon proficiencies are ridiculously specialized, decide on groups of weapons whose use should be considered a single skill in your game.

Let your imagination run wild. **FUDGE** is the release valve for every frustration you've ever felt when you looked at a rule book and through, "That's stupid!"

To insert a reality check here, some game mechanics do translate into **FUDGE** better than others. There are more than seven levels of magical mastery in AD&D, for example, so you can't just say a Superb wizard casts spells like a 7<sup>th</sup>-level wizard. But **FUDGE** does include the catch-all category of Gifts which don't necessarily need to be rated on the standard scale. If you're totally enamored of **AD&D** magic, with a little work you can decide on how much experience is needed to attain each level of the gift Wizardly, then translate the individual spells into **FUDGE** terms as they come up in the game.

It is also worth noting that (as many of you already know), **FUDGE** is neither the first game to ever rate attributes on a verbal scale, nor the first to attempt condensing all actions into a single resolution table. I believe both honors actually belong to *TSR's* **Marvel Super Heroes**. But where **Marvel Super Heroes** is pure role-

playing pablum, simplified to target young comic book fans who have never touched an RPG before, **FUDGE** is a hearty, no-nonsense steak-and-potatoes meal.

### ***Quality Control***

On top of its incredible excellence in conception, **FUDGE** excels in the equally important area of execution. The book skillfully guides the reader step by step through the factors he will have to consider when customizing the rules for his campaign world, from character creation to combat.

At every step, the author offers at least one free-form and one mathematically calculated option for handling things, and he never assumes that he has exhausted all the possibilities. Best of all, since everything hinges on the simple, universal Trait and Resolution systems, the GM is free to change any single rule he cares to without worrying it might throw the rest of the rules out of kilter.

While I have so far done only limited playtesting of the system, I tried as I read the book to predict rules problems that would arise in play. I came up with several – and was astounded as, time after time, I would find an effective and simple answer to dispel my doubts, if not on the very next page, at least in the very next chapter. Believe it or not, for

example, **FUDGE** handles all the problems of trying to squeeze giants, diminutive creatures, and superheroes into its seven-step range of attributes with one astoundingly simple mechanic.

What most convinced me that the author had carefully thought out the ramifications of every aspect of his game design, though, was that in the published version of **FUDGE** he corrected a subtle mathematical flaw in the Resolution table that I had noticed after the GenCon preview, but too late to point it out to him (i.e.: he found it without my help).

Originally, the table had been weighted so that a character rolled a "+0" result almost half the time. While this was fine for facing inanimate hazards, it caused a real problem when two characters faced each other in combat. As a matter of probability, if one player had a simple one-level skill advantage over the other, he would be able to strike his opponent roughly three times as often as his opponent could land a blow against him. In essence, this meant that luck played a little part in combat unless the fighters were of identical skill – not exactly the way to build tension in a game.

Thankfully, the Resolution table that finally got published has changed the proportion of blows traded from 1-to-3 to approximately 2-3 for opponents with a one-level skill difference.

The author has headed off the one true complaint I had about his game, so all I've been able to do for you as a critic is qualify my praise where it seems appropriate.

For her work as publisher, editor and typographer of **FUDGE**, Ann Dupuis also deserves recognition for the excellence of her work. **FUDGE** is one of the best-edited gaming products it has ever been my pleasure to read. I noticed only one single word in the entire book which might have been misspelled. It was one of those long words that looks inherently awkward no matter how you spell it, and I forgot what it was before I could tear myself away to look it up. Considering the rest of the book, though, I strongly suspect she got it right. This when I am accustomed to seeing regular typos, misspellings, and errors in logic from even the high-budget production of the largest game companies.

Simply put, from start to finish, **FUDGE** is the sort of quality product that can't be mistaken for anything but a labor of love for everyone involved. If you're a role-player who frequents the Internet anyway, you'll be missing a real treasure if you don't download yourself a copy. Even if you don't frequent the Internet, if you've ever found yourself tinkering with the rules to a role-playing game, you'll find it well worth the effort to track down a copy of **FUDGE**.

Gamers without access to the Internet or a friend's copy of the book will probably have to mail order it directly from Wild Mule. You can write to them at P.O. Box 838, Randolph, MA 02368-0838 for complete information.

At a price tag of \$10.00 (plus 1 dollar shipping and handling) the book would admittedly be a so-so buy if evaluated solely on the quality of its physical components, but the fact that you're free to legally reproduce any or all of it could make it feasible for you to share the cost with a group of friends or with your entire gaming group.

As a final word of caution, it should be noted that **FUDGE** is not anything a new game master should cut his role-playing teeth on . Though the game is elegant in its simplicity, and as well suited for players who are raw beginners as it is for those who grew up playing RPGs, it was written to appeal to those GMs who have grown to the point that they find themselves making up house rules and second-guessing the authors of their favorite systems.

Most beginning game masters need the structure of an established set of rules, and would likely find the total freedom of choice in **FUDGE** more than a little overwhelming.

**Originally Published**

*SHADIS Magazine*, Issue #17, Volume III  
Number 5. January/February 1995: 78 – 81.