Story citadel

I have played role playing games before, but all of them were video games. I wanted to play dungeons and dragons but never met the right people who I could play with, or an opportunity to play it with someone. So, I was familiar with the notion of what an RPG game is , but not with what an table top rpg is like ,thus when I read RPG 101 , I was not very shocked by how a character is formed but it was nice to see how battles are resolved, or how the success of an event is judged. What caught my attention was the random allocation of skill points, because in any video game, you always have a fixed number of points to allocate.

<u>First experience at making a character for a table top rpg.</u>

Julianne was the person who was going to guide our group. She helped us come up with characters by asking us a question, and we had to write that answer while keeping in mind our character. The questions she asked were (along with my answers to that question) -

1) What day to day activities do you see your character involved with?
Sneaking around, killing people, reading books, gathering information.

2) What abilities does your character possess?
Good agility, can charm people, weapon master, good observation skills

3) What profession does your character have?
Spy

4) What is his personality like?
Calm, Alert, Knowledgeable, organized, quick wit

5) List one weakness/ fear
Overprotective about real identity, family, friends etc.

6) Ultimate goal in life
Eliminate corruption

7) List 3 secrets. 2 which are known to the character, and 1 which is not.
- His wife is in same organization
- He was a prisoner of war before (CHANGE)
- Unknown secret - the organization he's working for is root of all corruption

8) List 3 characters a mentor, a life line and an arch nemesis
-Mentor- father
-Lifeline - wife

- Arch Nemesis – Punisher
9) What is his attack style like?
-DPS, stealth attack - Rogue / Disabler

10) Weapon
Knife/sniper

Once this character forming exercise was done, we decided to tell others and get their opinion on what they think about our character and what they perceive will be the relation between their character and my character.

We assigned skill points to our character by using a system Julianne made, where we had to choose one amongst - a set of d6 which are openly rolled, and a set of d6 which are secretly rolled.

Following this, we went through a really small scenario of a bar scene, which Julianne organized and made up on spot.

The reason I am talking about this whole exercise is to actually give a perspective of how it helped me get into the new world of table top RPG's. I always thought that the table top rpg's would have a board, and the game master would have a scenario and he would be guided by the book I did not realize , that any scenario could be inculcated, and RPG's are actually all about how you make a character, and how that character's dynamics are with characters of other people.
I realized that now I was not playing the game as Heem, but I was playing it as my character. I had to think what my character would do, given his personality and traits. This exercise really helped me to come up with a character, and to actually help me make a scenario for a game. I was now able to brainstorm various possible scenarios I could use for this assignment and thus started my brainstorming phase -

Brainstorming

I decided to go through various pre-existing scenarios to help me brainstorm.
I went through the following links to help me understand what typical brainstorm scenarios are like –

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabletop_role-playing_game
- http://www.homebrew.net/games/
- http://www.rpglibrary.org/articles/storytelling/36plots.php

I listed out the following scenarios I would want for my game -
Crime scene
Bewitched forest
Fantasy land - elves gnomes etc.
Gods
Animal/bird kingdom
Heroes with special items
Story of geometry shapes
Hunger games
Time travel
Background
Story with some particular secrets etc.

I decided to go with the theme of hunger games/survivor and wanted the players to be against each other rather than being in the same team. There were a lot of difficulties I saw with this scenario, and I talked to Jesse as well as other experienced table top RPG players and these were their concerns –

- It would be difficult for players to plan something secret, because players would have to pass secret notes to the DM and the DM would have to manage them.
- Players who are not interacting would be bored.
- Table top RPG's are all about table talk, and once I pit players against each other that element is taken away.
- I am not giving players the freedom of settling into the character and acting it out.
- It felt more like a board game, than an RPG.
- The story element felt a bit distant.
- If a player dies, they will get bored. Is there some way for them to still keep interacting?

I also got some suggestions, to modify the game keeping the scenario –

- What if the players are a part of clique and they have to survive as a whole in this game, their competitors would be the other participating teams.
- Let players go on the adventure as a team, but give them some secret missions or knowledge that introduces the idea of players going against each other at a later part of the game.
- To manage the secrets, why not play it online, using chat windows

I thought about going forward with it to actually find out how it plays. I will say this that I was quite aware that there was a very good chance that this adventure would not go very well with the group and it might leave people bored. I really wanted to see what all elements would make the game fail, and not make it work, thus I decided to go forward with it.

Setting up the game

The first thing I decided was to make a map. I used a quite a few number of maps to start off; some of the maps I referred were –
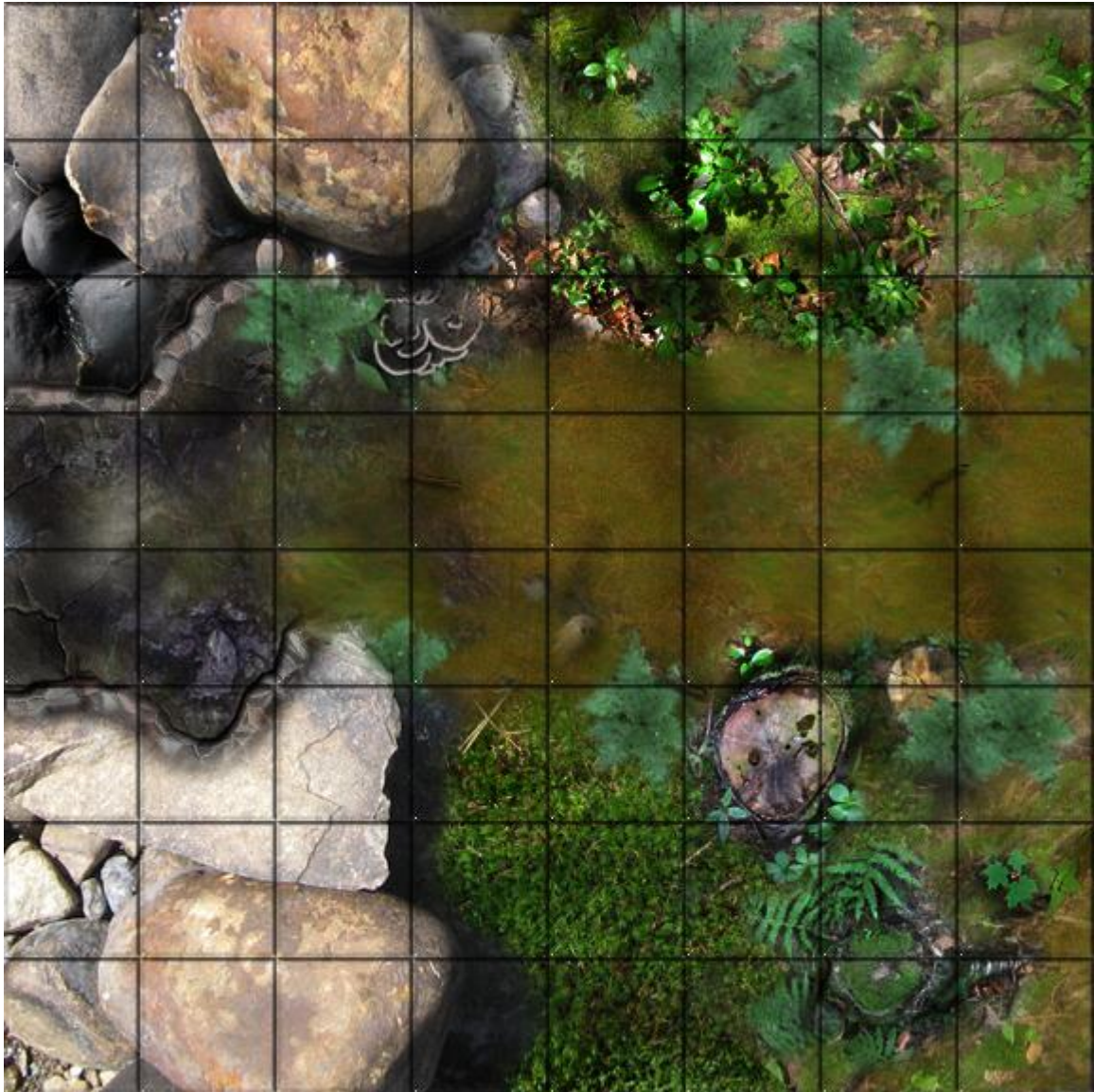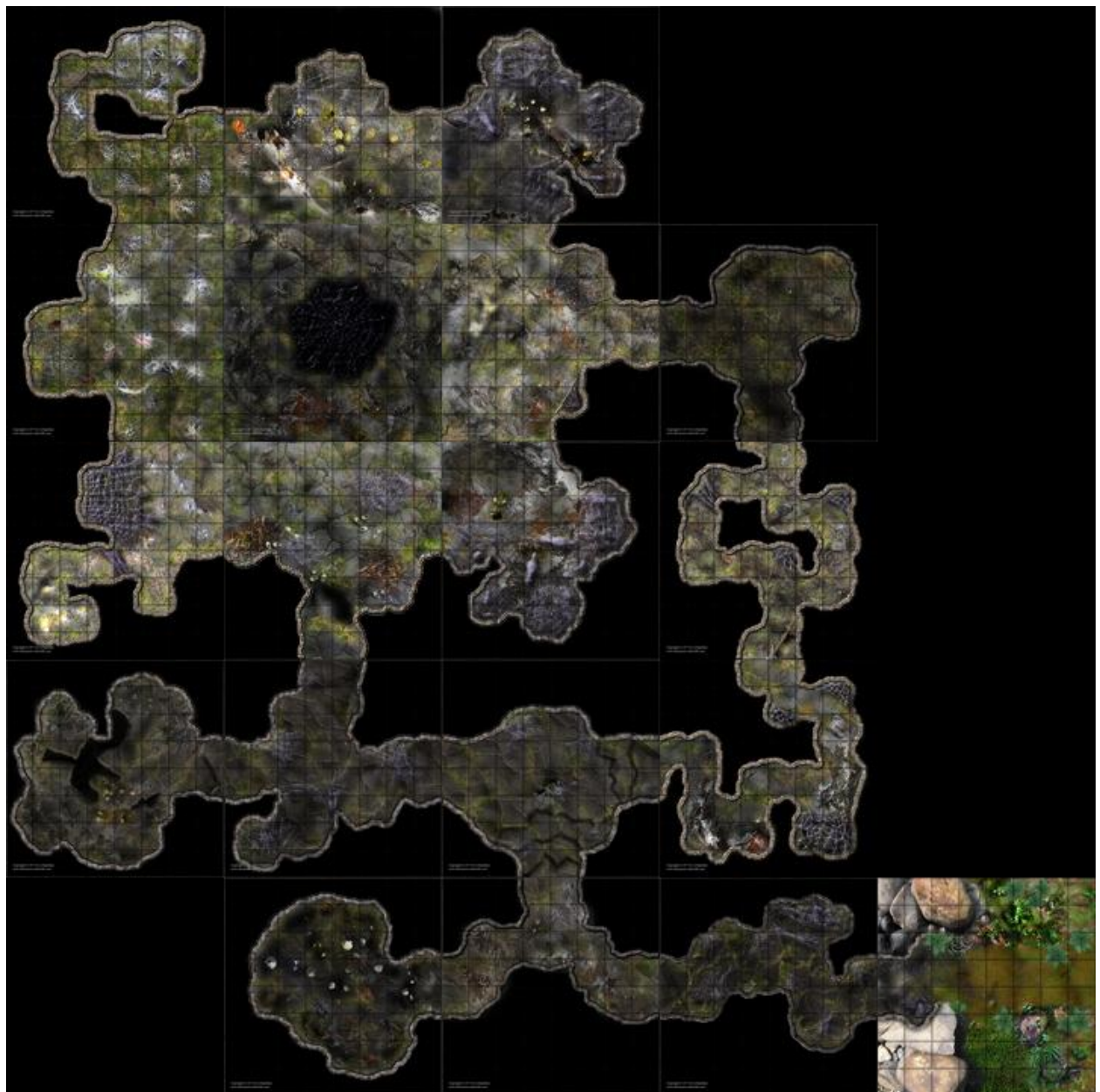
Based upon all these references, I decided the easiest thing to do was to start with a grid and start drawing a map on that. The grid helps in the following ways –

- You have really defined positions of players and squares you can put treasures or monsters on.
- The field can be evenly divided into areas which are more intense and areas which are not
- It is more intuitive to move as well.
- The squares show exactly where certain hotspots for e.g. caves/trees etc. are and they can strategize well.

I feel this was a really important aspect of my game because, I need to make it pretty to capture the attention of the players initially. I think that they might be overwhelmed by the amount of stuff they can do so in order to not make them lose interest if I have a decent looking map, I will be able to grasp their attention for the amount of time needed to make them interested in it. So, I came up with a map which is shown in the image below –

Also, to help me with conducting the game I made a rough map of where variety of events could occur. These were events like encountering monsters, treasure chests containing food, water or medicines or weapons/armor. I also printed out monster, food and water images to help with encounters and keep things easy and make conducting the game easier.

These images are as below –
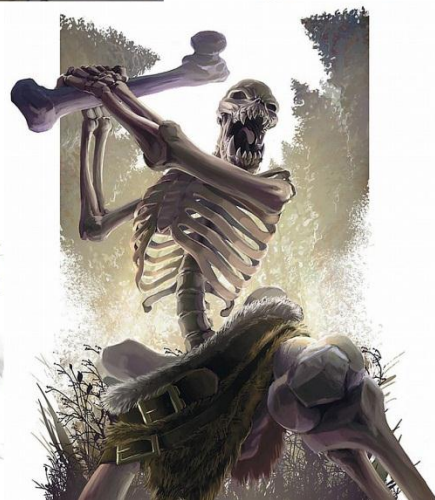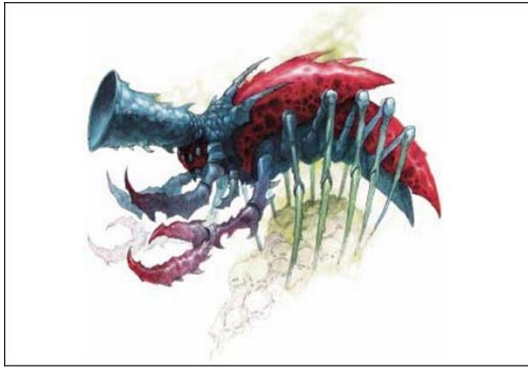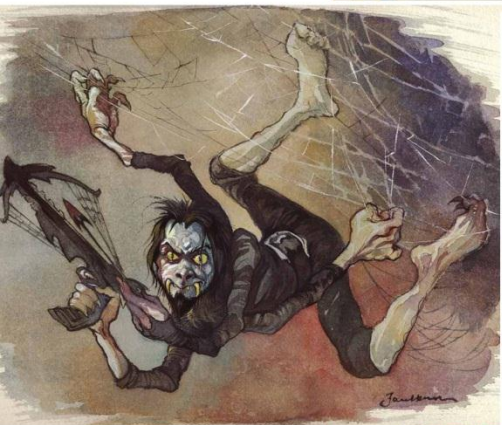
Character Sheet (for my game)

Character name

Weapons -

Each player has the following Physical skills –

1) Melee combat
2) Ranged combat
3) Speed
4) Armor
5) Endurance

Each player has the following Mental skills –

1) Charm
2) Sanity
3) Repair/workmanship
4) Medicine
5) Knowledge

Apart from this, the players will have the option of being good at some of the following physical activities –

1) Swimming
2) Climbing
3) Running
4) Flexibility
5) Stealth

Hunger –

Thirst-

Health Points –

Food –

Water

Medicines/Potions owned –

Traps set –

The Adventure

<u>Background story –</u>

 Since long, the people of Tarntia have been considered to be sadists. The rulers love to see humans tortured and under pain. To satisfy these needs, the prisoners and the wrong doers are pitted up against each other, till just one survives. They are given a limited amount of food and water supplies; they are provided the basic weapons to KILL!

Today is your turn and you will be the ones who will be put in the arena. Your goal is to be the last person to survive, and you need to do this with 20 days because otherwise, you will die of poisoning. The king has given the schedule of events as follows –

Day 1-5 – No External factors are introduced

Day 6 – Poison released

Day 7 -10 – Small monsters introduced into the arena

Day 11 - 15 – Large monsters introduced

Day 16 – Resources are extinguished

Day 17 – Poison without cure released

Day 18 – Trolls is put into the Arena

Day 19 – Dragons introduced

Day 20 – If at the end of this turn, if more than 1 player survives, they are not taken out of the arena and let to die of poisoning. If just one player survives, the king provides him with a tonic to cure the player of the poison.

So, this is the basic premise of the game, and I expect players to generate stories of how they strategized to reach certain treasures and how they hid to fight the other players, laid traps etc.

What all skills do the players have?

Each player has the following Physical skills –

- Melee combat
- Ranged combat
- Speed
- Armor
- Endurance

Each player has the following mental skills –

- Charm
- Sanity
- Repair/workmanship
- Medicine
- Knowledge

Apart from this, the players will have the option of being good at some of the following physical activities –

- Swimming
- Climbing
- Running
- Flexibility
- Stealth

The players can start off with any kind of weapons they want, but they will be able to find only the following types of weapons in the arena –

Ranged Weapon-

- Bow and arrow
- Shuriken
- Javelin
- Crossbow
- Darts
- Catapult
- Boomerangs

Melee weapons

- Sword
- Mace
- Knife
- Shields
- Hammer
- Axe

Depending upon how they allot the skill points the players will be able to interact with the environment and set traps or make potions from plants.

Speed - this allows the player to cover more distance with the same amount of food consumption

Endurance – This is how much food the player will require to eat per day, and how much endurance he has to survive

Charm – Used to convince other players to join up or fool/deceive/con them0

Sanity – This determined how much sanity they have from the poison. The poison affects this negatively everyday

Repair/Workmanship – This is the ability which will enable them to setup traps, enhance, repair or sharpen weapons etc.

Medicine – This skill allows the players to combine various plants to make them into potions like poison which can be put on long distance weapons or to make medicines which can slow the effect of poison.

Swimming – how good a swimmer they are and to what extent they can use nearby water sources to their advantage, people with more points in swimming have a higher advantage if the fight goes into water or there are ponds or rivers nearby.

Climbing – The players who invest their points in this skill tend to be able to climb the hilly regions with a lot of ease. They are agile and will be able to scale trees too.

Grace – This determines how much they strafe and parry their opponent's blows in the battle

Flexibility – They can go through tighter spaces which most other players will not be able to explore

Stealth – this determines how good the player is at camouflaging himself and hiding from opponents and sneaking past them

Knowledge – This is the skill that determines how much a player perceives and can tell if something is edible or poisonous.

The puzzle –

The puzzle in my game was to able to find all the 4 parts of keys of the treasure chest and combining it to open the treasure box.
The keys were as follows -
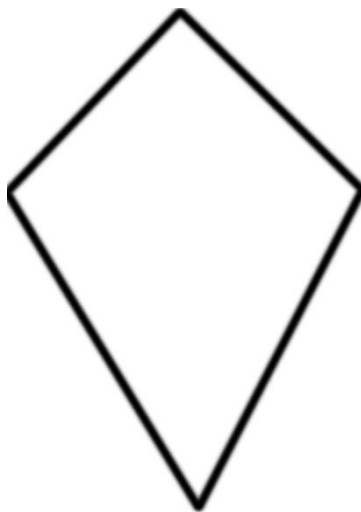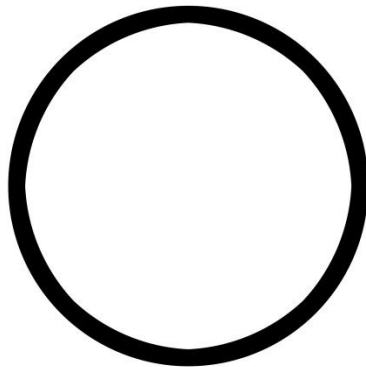
As shown below, the treasure box was surrounded by 4 square boxes each with a symbol corresponding to the parts of the key. The players had to put the keys in each box to open it.

Analysis of the puzzle –

The puzzle was a little bit weird, the way it was placed. It was easy once the saw the symbols were there. They were wondering the pattern in which how they go the part of the keys?

How do you make the aspect of giving keys to whom fair?

I also inculcated the idea of a monster being generated to someone who tried to open the treasure box without the right keys.

In the end I had a feeling that the puzzle was not too tough or not too easy, it was a bit weirdly organized. The players had no feedback if a part of key was placed right or wrong. This is important because they even tried to combine it as a whole and put it in the key hole. They did not realize that it was 4 small keys acting as one big key to open the treasure.

How I expect the game to progress

I played Julianne's adventure before writing this section. Also, there was a lot of skepticism whenever I talked about this idea to someone experienced, which I have mentioned above. Following are the things as to how I expect the game to progress and how the players will feel:-

- The game will be too sound too complicated to manage and handle and the players would be confused as to what to do.
- They will initially try to explore the game , and I feel that it might be a little boring and a little confusing for them
- One of them will encounter a treasure/puzzle/monster and things will get exciting depending on what they find. It might be a small monster they have to battle or some food if they are exhausted.
- I will try to, as a DM, pitch them nearby each other and I think they would just try to fight each other head on, rather than trying to strategize and use the environment to their advantage considering the physical activities they have invested in.
- So till day 5, i.e. about 5 turns, the players will not really face any kind of encounter or danger and hence their interest levels will drop.
- Once they face any kind of danger, or player vs. player encounter, they will start getting more into their game.
- For the first few fights they have, they will not use any kind of strategies, but I expect them to use the physical activities to their advantage.
- The Meta gaming will play a huge role in how fun/boring this game is. If passing secret information on notecards, to the DM works, it might give a really good variation to table top RPG gaming, otherwise it might fail totally.
- Also, the way I am planning to manage maps, is by cutting it up and then giving the appropriate parts to the players as they explore.
- The problem with this might be that , it would be confusing and time consuming to give a piece to each player
- Also, how to determine which player lands where in the arena. It might give some players a little more advantage over the others.
- How do you deal if they team up? How does the game end situation happen, if they have teamed up and eliminated the other players?

My predicted interest curve.
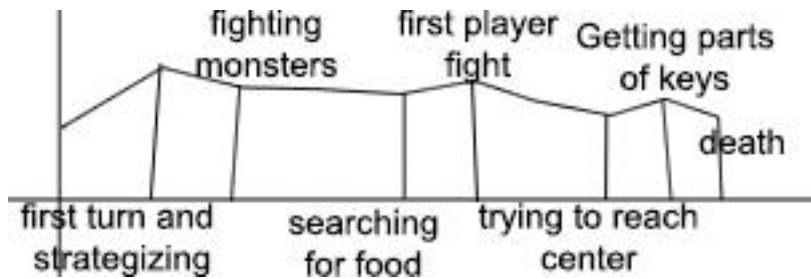
My curve hypothesis –

I predict that initially players would get excited by the notion of being able to do anything and strategize. Their interest curves will peak initially when they explore and scour for food and set traps or strategize.

They will encounter a monster, and will like to fight it but then after this their interest curve will go down because they will still be scouting and not doing a lot.

It will peak up again, when they come face to face with another player and would like to fight them.

Once the fight is over, they curve will start going down, when they will start looking for the part of the keys.

If they die, their curve will just keep going down.

I also predict that the curve will keep going down and up, and this will mainly be because the players will get bored when it's not their turn and their interests will peak again when they can start moving or strategizing.

The game
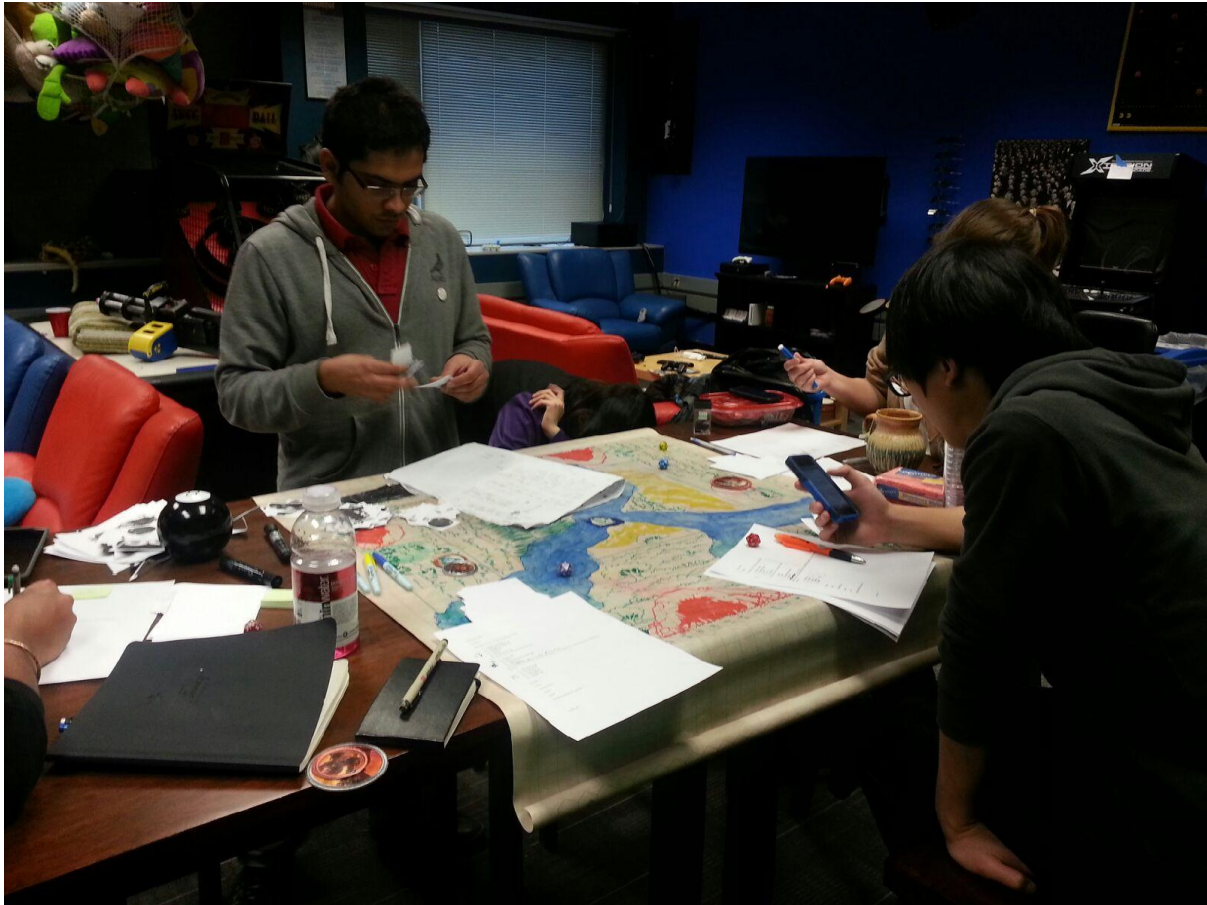
Everything that I predicted to go wrong did. I definitely think I had a playtest which was not a lot of fun, but it was interesting. I actually learned a lot and I will be noting down my observations and analysis -

1) <u>The first thing I was warned about was having an adventure in which all the players were against each other. This is why I feel it did not work -</u>

So, in an RPG players want a LOT of freedom. When they are against each other they want to be able to do things all the time. The Meta gaming which is a big part of role playing game, influences the behavior of the players and the things they want to do. For e.g. In the very first round, the players did not know the position of the others and the first 2 players did not do just much, they moved and asked for what surrounds them. The remaining players took the opportunity to setup traps and the first 2 players became cautious and wanted to move up the tree where they could be safer.

Moreover, in fights, they wanted to know when they could join in if a fight was happening nearby. Also, how do you inform if a player was near other? Who do you inform first, to make the game fair?

How far can the players see other things? Normally people can sense movement and sounds, how do you put this experience for so many different players? Also, this

is always changing because players move, and once someone has moved there is a chance they will be near another player. So, it's not really fair if the DM tells the moving player that there's another person in front of them, because then they get the advantage of first attack.

Another thing is, all the players have different abilities they are strong in, for e.g. climbing, swimming etc. How do they utilize these to simulate a real time fight?

It is a better idea to have teams and let them decide it, but then again the number of teams should be really small. Also, I am not quite sure if it will work out too, because then the DM has to manage the team tactics.

The game would probably work out better if it was a virtual world because then the players could actually connect to the avatars and make them do, plus they will be interacting at the same time so there will be no "down time" so to say.

2) <u>Another thing is how do you keep players, who are not taking their turn, interested?</u>

So, since all the players were against each other, it was just fair to have turns. This was a major flaw, because players wanted to do a lot of things, like move but as well as place traps, explore the place they are in currently etc. How do you give all this information while making sure the other players are still interested in the game? How do you make sure that the players can get to do all they can realistically, and keep the other players interested in the game?

Moreover, if a player encounters a monster how long should the battle be? If the monster is going to drop generous treasures, it should not be too easy to defeat, but then again, if it is not too easy to defeat , it will go on for long, and it really is not very interesting to wait for your turn and watch another player rolling dice to kill off a monster.

3) <u>How do you make sure, how much encounters and opportunities you give to each player?</u>

So, if the players are all one team, the DM can pretty much control the adventure and change it as and when he feels that its getting a little boring , he can introduce a monster or a twist anytime. With this game, if I make one player face more monsters than another, it would make it unfair towards him/her. The particular player might get more treasure, but they are also in the constant danger of also dying, moreover the other players would surely get bored. They would feel that they are not being a part of the adventure. Now, if you balance it, each turn would last longer and that too would bore the other players.

Would it be fair if someone comes upon more number of treasure chests? If not really, how do you really balance that it's not unfair.

4) <u>The fiasco about hunger, food, thirst and water.</u>

I had a mechanic in the adventure, where each player had to consume food, in order to keep up with hunger, and had to consume water each turn to keep up with thirst. These would be the resources they would have to scour for, while in the adventure. These made for a good constraint to make the players move and explore but what happened was, it became difficult to manage. It was difficult to keep track of who had how much food and what amount of hunger. Actually, we could never keep a track of thirst at all, we tried to keep a track on hunger, but eventually would forget it for some player and have to back track. This was another problem, and although one might agree that the mechanic was good and made sense, it was a little difficult to manage. I think giving them tokens would have worked better, where they would have to give the DM a certain number of water and food tokens to walk a certain number of blocks.

5) <u>Maintaining the positions hidden and secret</u>.

So, we started out by everyone having a secret position, the DM had everyone's positions with him and each person just knew their own position. This sounded like a really fun perspective to the players, the movement was done by announcing the direction and the number of steps they wanted to move and I would change it accordingly. What happened then was that there were slight discrepancies between the record the DM had, and what the player had. Moreover it was difficult to manage for each player and keep a track of their movement.
Eventually, all the players just decided to reveal their positions on the map and put their tokens on the map. This made things easier to manage, but the whole aspect of wanting to hide from the other players went down the drain.

6) <u>Connection of the puzzle –</u>

My puzzle was more collecting different parts of keys and attaching them over the box containing the treasure box to open it. The puzzle as described by the players was not quite tough to figure out and it made sense, but what about the treasure box? What did it contain? Did it mean instant win? They knew that it did not mean instant win, then why was it there? It contained resources to make a player really powerful but, was it worth it to race other players to it; they were not sure about it.

Interest curve of players that played the game.

Julianne's Feedback
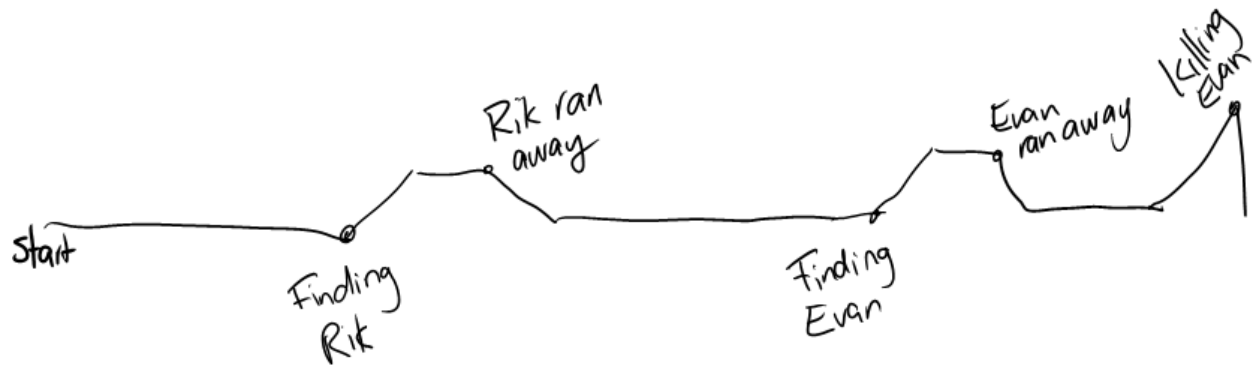
Julianne's curve –

She had was always interested in the game and was trying to attack other players during her turn, but when it was not she felt totally disconnected.
She won the game, and towards the end, the battles kept her engaged.
Thus, one can see the parts in the curves where it is just flat, where she was just waiting for her turn.
This vastly exemplifies how the turn managing is not a very good idea for adventure games.

Mohan's Feedback

HEEM'S GAME
- Mohan
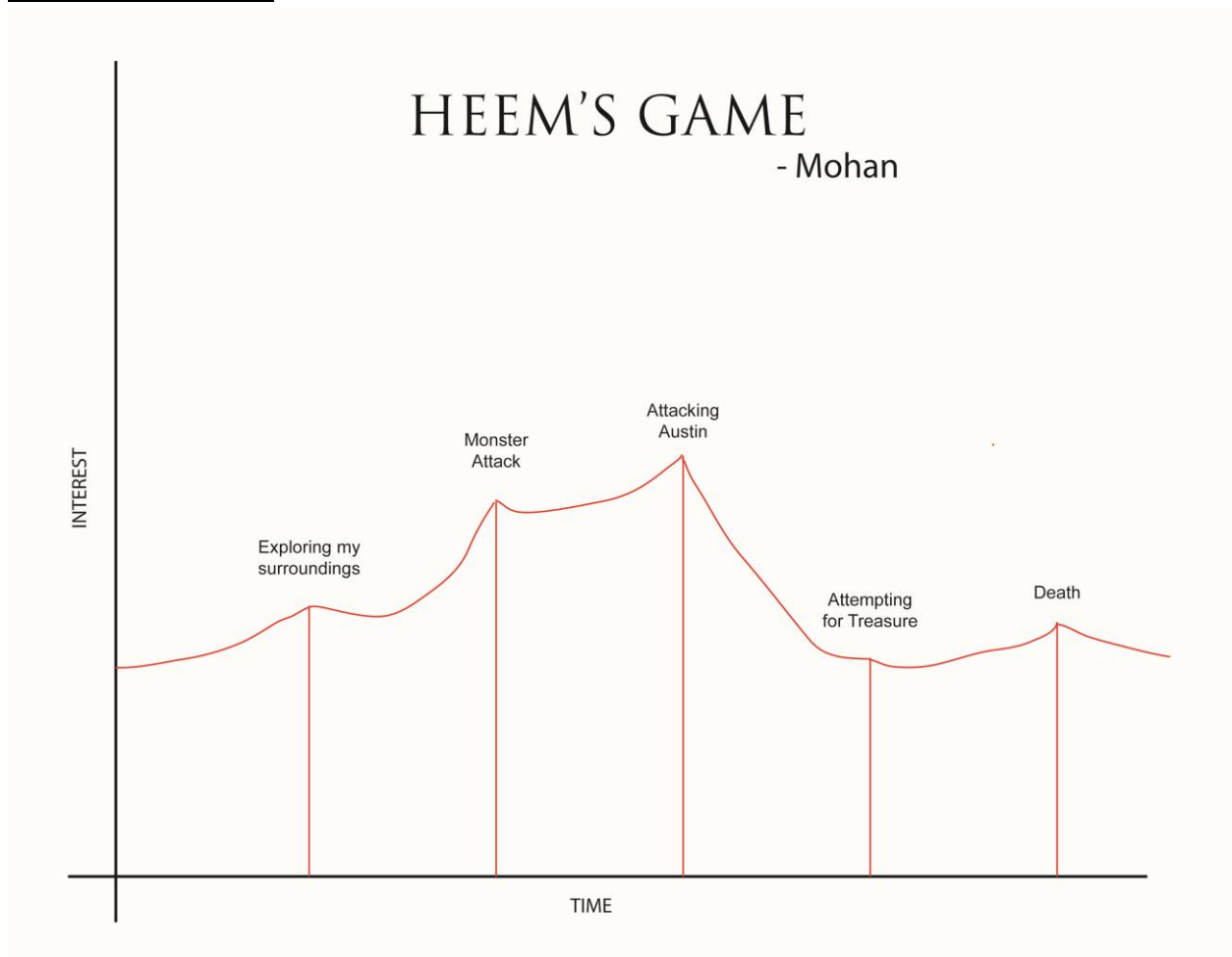
Mohan's Curve –

Mohan, tried to keep himself involved in the game in the beginning. He chased after the treasure from the beginning and thus you can see his interest curves going up. Once he reached the treasure, and had to fight Austin the interest peaked but after he killed of Austin, he just had to open the treasure and he did not have all the keys so started getting bored. He decided to wait till others came to him and died by a stronger player, thus the curve went on a decline.
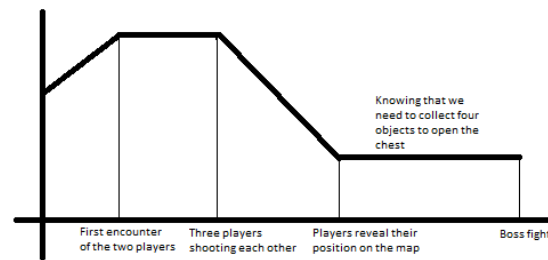
Austin's feedback
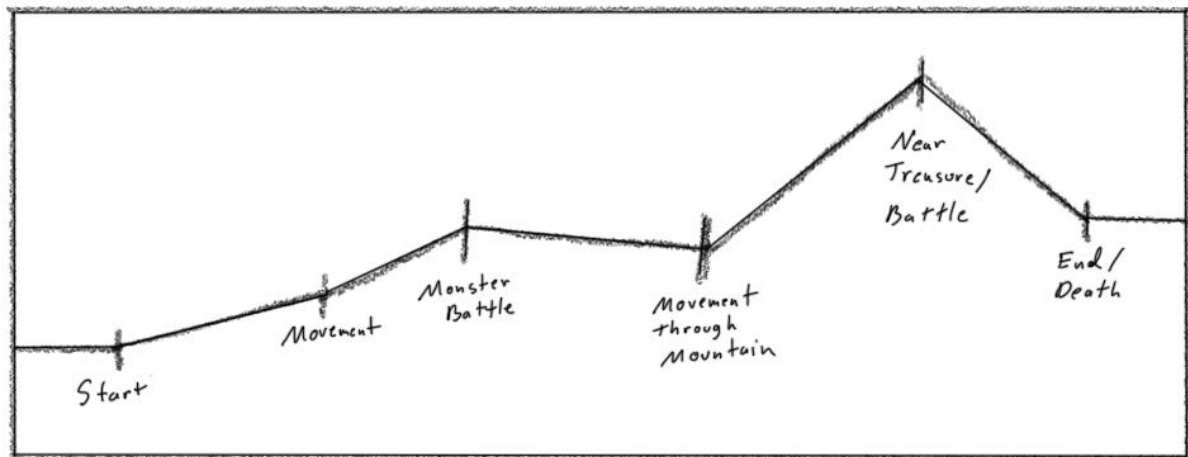
Austin's curve –

For Austin, he started setting up traps and exploring for items from the beginning itself, and thus his curves were on a rise. Even he was going directly for the treasure and thus his interest peaked when he had to battle Mohan for it. He was defeated in the battle and as a result got bored throughout the rest of the game.

<u>Evans feedback</u>

First encounter of the two players | Three players shooting each other | Players reveal their position on the map | Knowing that we need to collect four objects to open the chest | Boss fight

<u>Evan's curve</u>

So, Evan really liked the concept of strategizing and fighting 4 other players, trying to hide and use the environment for each other's advantage. Thus his encounter peaked till he got the fights with other players. There was a time when Evan, Rik and Julianne were really close to each other and all of them got into a fight. But Evan decided to run and thus after this the game started to bore him a little.

Conclusion

<u>What I learned</u>

- Table top RPGs are a lot of fun, the basic premise is that the players should get into the role of their characters.
- The adventure should be well defined ,so that if the DM wants to change it at a certain point they know where to take the players to
- Its better to have a set of plot points rather than letting the players create their own story, this is mainly because the players might want to do different things and if the plot points are not well defined the game may go haywire
- I feel that the strategy portion in an RPG is not about planning to defeat your opponent but to rather plan things with the team and head towards the next major plot point of the story.
- RPG is unlike most other board games, here players would rather not take turns and would rather want to act as a team. For e.g. they might want to focus fire on an enemy to kill it, and you should allow such situations.
- To make a map, use grids. They are the best option for marking out plot points. Also, linear 1 dimensional maps work great for making a story out of it. Even if you have a round map, or a 2D map, make sure the plot points are such that the players know how to progress through it linearly, otherwise they will get lost and not know what to do.

What NOT to do in an RPG
- RPG is simulating real life actions in a fictional setting. In real life things happen concurrently and the time stamps are fixed, in RPG you need to make sure the events don't happen in such a manner that they cross each other's time stamps because that will lead to a disaster. That is another thing that went wrong with my game. The players would place a trap, and if another player walked over it in the same round of turn does it mean the trap should be activated? It might be unfair in certain situations.
- Try not to have a lot of players acting against each other. This leads to more table talk and I felt it halts the progress of the RPG's story.
- When you leave things for a player, it would lead to a disaster because they might want to do anything, and your game might not have a perfectly planned premise for such situations.
- Make the map smaller and more dense i.e. if the players have to walk around a lot to reach 1 plot point , it is going to bore them and will not be a good experience for them.