

Ludosophy!

I HATE CHARISMA.

I loathe it. I *despise* it.

I'm not talking about a person, thankfully. I'm talking about the statistical ability score assigned to role-playing game characters from the earliest days of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Of all the attributes, I probably find it the most distasteful, and I'll explain why.

The origins of charisma as a concept goes back to the notion of divine right. Greeks thought of it a divine "grace" given to those favored by the gods. Jews and Christians extended the term to those who were favored by—and had some authority from—the divine. Nearly two millennia later, Max Weber borrowed the term to refer to those who had particularly strong leadership qualities, but did little to strip it of that supernatural air. Essentially, the gods should be followed, and those blessed by the gods should be followed.

Dungeons & Dragons referred to it as a "combination of appearance, personality, and so forth", though it chiefly served to determine how many lackeys you could hire and how loyal they'd be. (You still had to pay for them.) Of course, the relationship between likability and leadership has been ingrained in RPGs for a long time, which seems odd when you consider how often people complain about their elected officials. Ruling and being loved by the people are often at odds. It also ignores that much about becoming a leader has to do with the class you were born into—or the people you've ingratiated yourself to.

Of course, with various races getting adjustments to their ability scores, dwarves were less likable, and human-orc hybrids were never likable—they were, at best, inoffensive. Though *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* at least was kind enough to note the charisma penalty didn't apply to members of the same "race", many games that followed weren't nearly as kind. In case if you were wondering if this was just represented the societal norms of all of AD&D's myriad settings—wherever you go, people frown at an orc—the AD&D supplement *Unearthed Arcana* put the lie to that.

Charisma

Charisma is a measure of your aptitude for captivating others. You use Charisma to win others over to you emotionally and to get them to trust you. This Trait is more a facet of a charismatic personality than it is an overt manipulation of others. It is a sum of the character's bearing, charm and power of influence. Charisma reflects your power to convince others to put their faith in you.

Specialties: Smooth, Eloquent, Outgoing, Captivating, Charming, Regal, Genial, Well-Mannered, Urbane, Sophisticated, Rustic, Gracious

Poor: Others avoid being around you.

Average: You are likable.

Good: People trust and confide in you.

Exceptional: You have something worth leading a nation.

In *Unearthed Arcana*, we got a new ability for characters: Comeliness. This represented how attractive you were to other characters. Or, to be blunt, how attractive you were to a cisgender, straight man of the academic persuasion. Charisma affected Comeliness, but not vice versa. (Comeliness is its own can of worms, but I'm going to put it aside for now.) You could have a face that was a literal gate to hell, but that didn't impact your Charisma any. Charisma was unknowable. It was unaffected by things like dress, demeanor, or even acne. It was an innate trait; either you were likable or not from birth. Though AD&D implemented skills later on ("Non-Weapon Proficiencies"), one couldn't train to be more charming. Either you were or weren't, barring the benefits of magic or the favor of the gods.

Later games would carry forth Charisma as a cargo-cult notion, though you could often mitigate your inherent likability with a skill like "Fast-Talk" or "Persuasion", or improve your inherent ability. Of course, this can be confusing when considered: how do you train to become more likable in a sense that *isn't* a skill? If not your skills or your looks, what did Charisma encompass? Still, games held onto it even though it made vanishingly little sense. For example, *Exalted* had three social attributes: Charisma (for persuading), Manipulation (for lying), and Appearance (how good you look to cisgender, straight men)². But it also had abilities like Persuade (for persuading) and Subterfuge (for lying). What is Charisma even measuring in that case? Well, it's something people have? Right?

Charisma is, at its core, the notion that certain people have some ineffable appeal beyond anything that can be measured. And to be fair, working out why somebody is popular or authoritative can be extremely hard! But it's a skill, one influenced by our self-presentation, what we're willing to do to please others, and our ability to win at the lottery of society-approved body features. It's also anything but universal. But to those who struggle with popularity—like the geeky demographic D&D hit hard—it can come across as ineffable.

1 In some games Charisma encompassed looks, but "appearance" or "comeliness" is another set of issues due to its relativity.

2 Not all *Exalted* writers were such—Jenna Moran is a notable exception—but most of them, particularly given *Exalted's* overall art direction.

A case in point: a lot of 1990s role-playing games often had leadership skills, so your character could go out and start a riot, or stop a riot... mostly just for starting and stopping riots. (Maybe the 1992 Los Angeles uprising was on designers' minds.) Often, charisma or leadership were given examples of who they might exemplify. Like, say, Hitler. Games like *Vampire: the Masquerade* or *Cyberpunk 2020* put forth Hitler as one of the prime examples of leadership skills—ignoring, of course, the circumstances and cohorts that brought him to power. If he was such a great leader, why did he look like such a fool to most of the world? The qualities that make one a leader are dependent on time and place; what might have made for a history-changing leader in the past could just produce a profile Reddit troll in today's world. Conversely, the hot takes that make somebody appealing on social media would have made for a boorish blowhard in other times. Of course, popularity and likability are two entirely different things.

Moreover, Charisma is often an ignored statistic in role-playing games. Many players and gamemasters sneer at it as a way of doing an end-run around role-playing interactions, reducing social interaction to a mechanical throw of the dice. Mind, the same could be said of many in-game abilities—nobody expects you to show how much your character can lift (unless you're playing the exercise RPG *Lifts*)—but Charisma gets singled out because it's incredibly vague. Strength can be measured by how much you can lift, but Charisma... is the number of Twitter followers you have? Maybe? Because it's vague and only dimly justified, it's more easily dismissed than your character's dart board score.

Another issue is that Charisma was never part of D&D's play loop, aside from hiring porters or the rare parley with a monster. Recently, the publisher ENWorld took a survey of D&D players to see what new systems to add to their D&D revision. What people explicitly didn't want was "social combat mechanically represented". And why should they? If your game is all about solving problems with swords, then solving them with words feels like an intrusion.

Charisma is flawed. But what can we do that's better than making a random reaction roll and modifying it with a measure of your divine charm?

Plenty. Interacting with other people is a skill, and we can start there. As somebody who's neurodivergent, I remember having to be taught how to react "appropriately" in social situations later than other children. Most people take these things to be innate, but they're not—many people just learn them so early that they take them for granted. Exactly how broad we want the skill to be depends on how much your game needs to detail social interaction, and whether or not skill at leading a gang can translate to leading a boardroom. Being empathetic is a much different skill than being forceful. And so on. Many games already cover this to an extent.

But there's more we can play with. People generally react positively to people who are like them. The social friction between different cliques is often driven by this, after all. Despite what Paula Abdul and the Wild Pair tried to teach us, research tells us that opposites *don't* attract. It could be that your ability to charm others is enhanced by your relative similiarity, or your ability to pass yourself off as similar. If you wanted greater depth, you could break down different mindsets and forms of interaction. Does your character share interests or beliefs with the person they're trying to interact with? Are they from similar cultures or occupations? All this can play into how well your protagonist hits it off with the supporting cast.

We could assign a color or symbol to specific traits. For example, maybe intellectual traits like philosophy or literary analysis get a ▲. So for every ▲ you have matching with another character, you get a bonus to persuade them. Or perhaps if you're socially skilled, you can change out what symbols you're presenting. Put on a trucker cap and work shirt and change one of your ▲ (academic) symbols to a ■ (working-class).

Or you could take a note from the excellent PC game *Signs of the Soujourner*. Maybe your social skill is represented by a playing deck's card suit. If you have all ♦s, maybe that means you're roundabout and polite. But maybe the person you're talking to has cards that are ♣s, which represent being blunt and straightforward. Like *SotS*, you get to trade cards at the end of the interaction, making your next interaction easier as each of you learn about each other and adapt to each other's communication style or culture.

You have games like *Hillfolk* that take a more narrative approach. *Hillfolk* values one aspect of social interaction: pressure, and applies that through its mechanics. People are rewarded for being persuaded, even if it's against their best interests, and it's a very simple mechanic where players balance their immediate goals as a character against their narrative power as a player. Those who are willing to concede can gather enough narrative power to eventually force other stubborn players to take their side when it really counts.

With that kind of thing, you also have the bonds mechanic used by many Powered by the Apocalypse games, where successful social interaction can grant bonds, a resource you can later spend to influence that person when necessary. But that could be taken to a more macro level. One could track "favor" with a given faction or locale. Many videogames do this, but it's relatively rare in role-playing games. By earning positive or negative interactions with a group, perhaps you could then cash in those points to dictate how the group reacts to your character, or what choices they make.



Hello, it's a... rolls dice...
pleasure to meet you!



Let's not pretend
references are humor.



Speaking of Gygax, sometimes people
just like you for something you made.



Well, I know how to avoid that! I'll
just make unlikeable things!



...



Kitbop: the Kitten-Kicking RPG!
Seven catbooting classes!
The Steeltoed! The Cleated!
The Fuzzy Slipper!



Fuzzy Slipper is a little
brother class for K&K noobs!

And there's simple mechanics like *Terra Bansho Zero's* Emotion Matrix, where when you meet somebody, you roll a random emotional reaction they have to you. However, you can spend some of your narrative currency to adjust it towards other possibilities. Though at times farcical, it focuses on pushing dramatic connections between people to spur role-playing, and matches the unlikely and sudden relationships often seen in manga and anime.

Some of these options may seem complicated, but if we can devise combat rules that take dozens of pages, certainly we can make games where social interaction is put to the forefront. After all, it's perhaps the thing that role-playing does best. You don't need to simulate a conversation like you simulate combat, you can just *have* it. But that doesn't mean systems can't enrich our tabletop improv, giving in-world context and stakes that a simple chat can lack, or giving fair weight to players who struggle at social interaction. Maybe you can keep social traits from becoming the dreaded "dump-stat" of your game.

So, uh, don't forget to favorite!

THIS ESSAY IS TITLED "INTERACTIVE FRICTION".

OTHER RESOURCES

Why'd people buy [How to Win Friends and Influence People](#)? Charisma is innate! It comes from the gods! Carnegie, you fool!

The [charisma](#) and [popularity](#) articles on wikipedia may seem obvious, but their references and links are worth looking into if you want insights into the specific elements of likability.

You may have already gotten it if you supported the massive Black Lives Matter bundle at [itch.io](#), but [Signs of the Sojourner](#) is good.

Public Speaking
You are able to mold the emotions of a crowd by making a speech. This might be at a political rally, in a courtroom, a lecture or even at the barricades once the revolution is underway. Whatever you want your audience to feel is what you want.
Novice: Entertaining speaker
Practiced: Compelling speaker
Competent: Inspiring speaker
Expert: Popular speaker
Master: Churchill or Hitler