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Ludi Gladiatorii Playtest Report

This iteration of the game has mainly been focused on the Roman world and giving Arena Masters the tools needed to recreate it. The most noticeable addition to the game from the player’s perspective is the goods and services list and market days.

 The list of goods is long and consists mostly of mundane items. The Players initially responded to this list in the way that I thought they would, “What’s with all these useless items?” Once I put things in context they understood my intentions and their perspective on the list changed.

 In many pen and paper roleplaying games the players shop by browsing an equipment list in the rule book. I have always believed that it is more interesting, realistic, and more immersive to have the Game Master run through the transactions with the players. This leads to a behavior I call “tangential buying.” Tangential buying occurs when, while browsing, an item catches your attention and you decide buy it on impulse or because you think it’s neat or desirable.

 This has to do with context. When a player is looking over a list of goods, a venison steak may just be another item. But in a roleplaying context, if the player is walking through a Roman market and the Arena Master describes the smell of fine marbled venison, with oil, garlic, and seasoning wafting from local street vendor’s stall, many players will investigate further because they can relate to the value of good food. I reinforced this behavior by ensuring that players cannot acquire better weapons and armor using the money they earn, only reputation can get them those. This is not only historically accurate, it create a clear division between the arena and the rest of the game world.

 Players found the arena combat to be exciting and seemed fond of both player versus player and player versus NPC matches. The largest match fought was a three-way fight between three pairs of gladiators.

 The most interesting moment in this fight was when one player sought vengeance on the enemy who had killed his NPC teammate (who he had grown to like). This is one of several conundrums that make a gladiatorial setting unique. Players are not always fighting generic enemies, sometimes they have to fight NPCs they know and trust, other times they must fight each other. I feel roleplaying games should create these kinds of scenarios as they force players to make difficult and interesting decisions.

 On the opposite end of the scale are the fights involving Noxii. The Noxii are this game’s equivalent of kobolds. These matches give the players the opportunity to team up and fight groups of low powered enemies. Players enjoy these matches because they are lower risk and make them feel powerful.

 Another major addition to the game was the “Your Beginnings” chapter which gave the players resources to develop the foundation of their characters. Players get to choose their homeland and the reason they were recruited as gladiators. It is worth noting that the majority of players decided they were criminals who were either wrongly accused or arrested for deserting from the Roman army. The other two options are slave or volunteer. This is interesting to for two reasons: the criminal is the most difficult enlistment path and almost guarantees death in the arena, and most people immediately choose it when they learn that Spartacus was a deserter from the Roman legion. I had one player go as far as to build Spartacus stating, “Spartacus was Awesome.”

 I think that many players (especially American players) find Spartacus type figures (who fight against a corrupt and oppressive establishment) to be incredibly relatable because they embody personal freedom standing to face tyranny. In many ways, he is to the Classical world what Robyn Hood is to the middle ages. Equally interesting is that the other generals of the Third Servile War (Crixus, Gannicus, Oenomaus, and Castus) are not remembered the way Spartacus is.

 In the player versus player matches there was always a moment of tension while the editor of the game decided the fate of the defeated gladiator. Interestingly, if the editor decided to spare the defeated gladiator, the victorious player was sometimes visibly disappointed that he did not get to finish the job. The defeated player was understandably relieved but I can only help wondering if some player’s satisfaction with their victory is dampened if they are denied their “iugular” (Finishing blow).

 The length of player versus player matches varied drastically. Depending on how carefully the players planned their actions the matches ran between two and fifteen rounds. The match which lasted only two rounds was the result of a rather interesting (and poor) tactical choice on the part of one of the players.

 The match was fought between a Retiarius and a Secutor. In the first round the Retiarius threw his net. The following round he threw his trident (which is not intended for throwing) at his opponent, intending to get a one-hit kill. However the trident was ineffectual against the Secutor’s shield. When the Retiarius ran to retrieve his trident the Secutor jumped forward and effortlessly decapitated him. Needless to say the Retiarius player was disappointed with the outcome of this match.

 For a time after the match I was trying to figure out how to balance this scenario. I soon came to the conclusion that I was balanced as it stood: a warrior who voluntarily disarms himself is fighting an uphill battle from the get go.

 I am especially pleased with the educational elements of the game. By playing, players learn tidbits about Roman culture and life; how their society was structured; and why they not only permitted, but encouraged blood sports. I tried my best to stay away from Hollywood depictions of Rome and Gladiator combat and focus on creating a historically authentic experience. Gladiators are a cultural icon with which most people are familiar and sever as a great place to start learning about the ancient world.