Written by The Geek
Thursday, 21 November 2013 17:14

Role playing games (RPGs) are a mainstay in geek culture. Historically, a bunch of gamers get together around a table where a GM (game master) creates for them an immersive world, where they control characters who make their way through life and adventure, using dice rolls to handle chance situations. The advent of the internet and the introduction of Virtual Tabletops has allowed gamers to begin to blur the geographic boundaries that used to impact the people that could play in the same game together. Aethercon takes that one step further, as an online RPG convention where gamers can meet new people and play in games both familiar and new. All for FREE.

This year Aethercon (http://www.aethercon.com), run the weekend of November 15-17, successfully pulled off it's second annual convention. Aethercon is a non-profit endeavor, and the immense amount of time and labor put into the development and organization is done so by non-paid volunteers. The people organizing things, managing technical issues, managing attendees in virtual panels and chatrooms, even those running the games are all volunteers. Above everything else, Aethercon is a labor of love.

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At the heart of Aethercon, making the concept even possible, is the concept of Virtual Tabletops. The two that Aethercon recommends and promotes are Roll20.net and Infrno . These programs allow users to view a common virtual tabletop, that is controlled by the game master. The players can only see the area of the screen that the game master makes available and are able to move little virtual characters (sometimes called token or pogs) around on the background provided by the GM. This background could be a map of a countryside, a dungeon or labyrinth, or even the scene of a fight. Players can use their tokens to show the direction they take, or even position themselves for fighting enemies. Both Roll20 and Infrno have impressive tools for extending the functionality of the tabletop. Need to roll dice to see if your halfling thief avoids detection? A built in dice rolling engine allows you to roll your dice publicly or privately so only you and the GM see the results. Your elven short-bow only shoots 60 feet? The measurement tool allows you to drag a ruler from your character to the enemy to see if your shot is possible. Encompass your most used commands and dice rolls into macros that you can activate at the click of a button. These kind of things, which normally required more hands-on work to figure out, really make the virtual tabletops somewhat easier to use than actually sitting around the table.
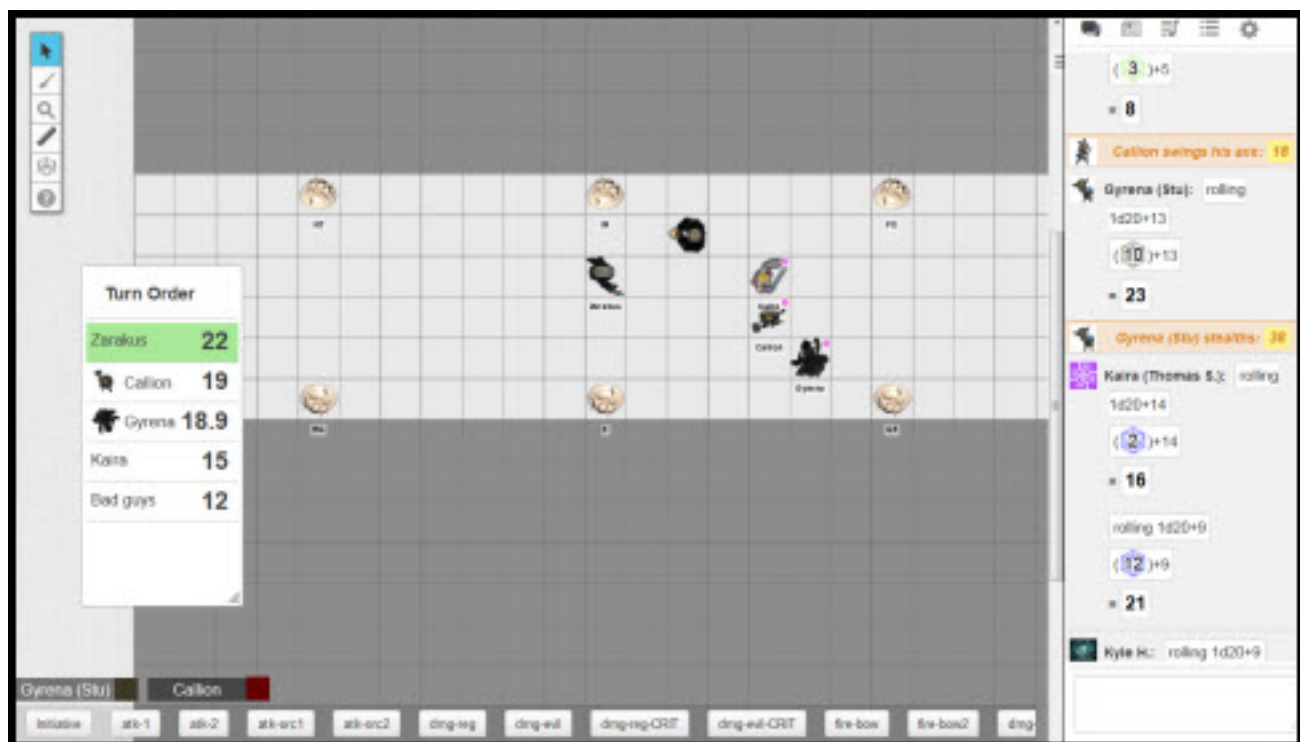
Sample Roll20.net Interface

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I myself "attended" this virtual convention, and participated in several games and a few of the chatrooms over the weekend. Its plain to see that in this, its second year of existence, Aethercon is still a little rough around the edges. For example, I signed up to play a game for Friday night. Once I signed up for the game, nothing happened. The button changed from "Sign up" to "Signup successful", but it stopped there. I knew the name of the game, the name of the GM, the time it started, that it would be run on Roll20, and utilize Skype for voice communication, but that was all that I knew. I didn't know what the next steps were. Would I get an email from Aethercon giving instructions? Or one from the GM himself? How did we exchange Skype IDs? How would I get the Roll20 game URL so I could join the game? A message on the screen, or even an email from Aethercon telling me that it would be my GM's responsibility to contact me before the game with final details would have alleviated some of my confusion.

There is so much more to Aethercon than just the game playing. There were panels and chats led by people well known in the gaming industries, live chatrooms, and even digital artist competitions where 2 artists competed in live drawing contests to complete their drawings within a certain amount of time. There was definitely a lot to see, and a good enough variety to cater to all sorts of people.

For me, Aethercon was about trying some new things. I had the privilege in participating in 3 games that were run by Curtis Baum, owner of Rcane Publications. These 3 games were comprised of 3 modules that when run back to back actually completed a bigger campaign. These games were run in Pathfinder, and I spent all 3 of them playing 2 things I am definitely NOT used to. I was a Paladin, and a dwarf. Truth be told in my many years of playing, I had never played either. The first game was odd, as I got my bearings, but when it came time for the next game and I was able to once again choose a character, I chose him again. And again a third time for the final game. Curtis himself was a pretty good GM, and very friendly, often laughing and joking with the group and often talking in a high pitched voice that sounded somewhere in between Stitch and Gizmo. I also participated in two other games, one Pathfinder and another AD&D First Edition.

While Aethercon was not for profit, it did have a number of sponsors. I'm not even going to try naming them all here, as not to offend anyone I might accidentally leave out. This means there were prizes to be awarded to people who played games, people who ran games, people who participated in chat rooms and panels, you name it. In my opinion, these prices were just the cherry on top of the already cool concept.

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So the bottom line? I had a really good time. I made a good number of new acquaintances along the way, and maybe a couple new friends. I stepped outside my comfort zone a little and played some characters I normally would not have normally played. It was very enjoyable. I plan on playing again next year and maybe this time trying out different game platforms. I might try a Steampunk or Superhero system, I've always been interested in those but don't know anyone who plays them. There are games for a variety of interests, limited only by the mind of the GM. I saw many custom and homegrown systems mentioned in the list of available games. And plus, many of these games are Newb friendly (which means they will accept first time players), and is indicated as such right on the game description.

While it is obvious to me that there are things to be tweaked and massaged, to make the whole system a bit smoother to the end-user, Aethercon are definitely on the right path. The hardest part, in my opinion, is bringing together the RPG players to give them a common place to play and have fun, all without leaving their houses. The additional niceties and polishing will just be icing on the oh so delicious cake.

Aethercon, nice job! I'll be seeing you again next year!