# Concerning the Prohibition of Murder Spells

I’ve actually played a lot of roleplaying games before (and during) the design/creation of World of Gaianar. One of the structural flaws I’ve sought to address concerns a type of spell that I call a “murder” spell. What is a “murder” spell, you might ask? These spells come in several flavors, all of which are bitter:

* Instant-death spells with no saving throws. Early editions of Dungeons & Dragons had numerous examples. One such spell was actually called “Slay Living”, wherein an allegedly good-aligned Priest could straight-up murder someone at a distance with this spell. There was no saving throw, no damage roll, just an early grave for the hapless foe. There was even a more potent version that prevented future resurrection!
* Ultra-damage spells with no saving throw. A spell that lists damage as 100+1d6 with no saving throw is basically a murder spell. Player characters get hit dice in the 1d6 to 1d12 range. Being generous with the odds, it’s reasonable that a character might even have 75% of the maximum hit points allowable for the character class. So, on average, a spell that inflicts 100+1d6 damage with no saving throw would be lethal to every player character unto the 12th to 14th level.
* Spells that allow the caster to teleport to an ultra-precise location and then immediately teleport out are essentially murder spells. For instance, of what use is a fortified castle when a wizard/assassin type can teleport into your bedroom, stab you in the throat with a poisoned dagger, and then teleport away?
* Instant-kill poisons are essentially murder spells. In real life, there are only a handful of natural poisons that are instantly fatal. People bitten by venomous snakes, spiders, and insects usually have some interval of time in which they might seek medical treatment. I once had a pretty bad Game Master for a AD&D 2nd Edition campaign that would basically kill off player characters with poisonous spiders as they slept. His answer to players’ complaints was “well, you should have rolled your saving throw better!”
* Level-draining spells are essentially murder spells. Some game systems allow for the possibility of monsters that drain one or more levels of experience with a single hit (and no save either!) For the hapless, low-level character, it is essentially a death warrant.

And those are just a handful of examples.

My philosophy for running a roleplaying game is that player characters should meet their deaths only through foolhardiness, stupidity, or noble sacrifice. They should not meet their deaths because of one bad roll based on effects from a poorly-worded spell. It also works both ways. Player characters should have to earn their victories. Bumping off the local slaver-lord should take more effort than a 3:00AM two-way teleport spell.

Murder spells cheapen game play. They either frustrate the players (when a beloved character is destroyed over a trivial application of the rules) or they make the encounter too easy (when low-level spell has an unintended side effect that fells a powerful enemy).

I wrote World of Gaianar to be a thinking person’s game, where strategy is more important that raw damage-per-round and where taking part in the story is more important than the box of loot at the end of the quest. Gaianar has a rich, self-consistent culture to explore. The novel “I, Construct” (also on this website) is a great resource for exploring all that Gaianar has to offer.

What’s a good way to design spells that aren’t “murder” spells? Here’s some advice:

* Always allow for a saving throw that either negates or reduces damage.
* Allow damage to be variable. For example, a 10d10 damage spell can still inflict up to 100 points, but it is less likely to be an instant-kill than a spell that inflicts a fixed damage of 100 points.
* Treat poisons and diseases as “damage over time” rather than being instantly fatal.
* Don’t write teleportation spells that bring characters to ultra-precise locations or to places that the character has never seen.
* Don’t write “save or die” spells.

The 2018 edition of World of Gaianar is (hopefully) free of such possibilities. If I’ve missed anything, please write to me and suggest changes.