



Hamlet's Hit Points

Robin D. Laws

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See Your Stories Like Never Before

Hamlet's Hit Points presents a toolkit that helps make storytelling in any RPG easier and more fun by classifying story beats and letting you track their ups and downs from hope to fear and back.

Armed with these tools, you'll be equipped to lay compelling track for an emotional roller-coaster that will keep everyone at your game table involved, excited, riveted.

In these pages, you'll find definitions of nine critical story beats. You'll read about the relationships between those beats. You'll also find complete analyses of three stories you know already--Hamlet, Casablanca, and Dr. No--to show you how the system works.

Written with roleplayers in mind, Hamlet's Hit Points is an indispensable tool for understanding stories, in games and everywhere else.

Hamlet's Hit Points Details

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From Reader Review Hamlet's Hit Points for online ebook

Roland Volz says

Analysing visual media to see how they work seems like the dry stuff you might do in a humanities class. But by picking three well-known (or at least easy-to-find) examples and using ordinary conversational language, Robin Laws makes transparent the dynamics of a good story. Thought-provoking yet light, this was an excellent read.

Chris Duval says

This is a formal analysis of the character interactions in the play, 'Hamlet,' and the two movies, 'Doctor No' and 'Casablanca.' It is pitched to gamers, particularly to GMs wishing to improve their role-playing. The idea is that the formal analysis, which includes a diagramming technique, can be applied to PC and NPC interactions, giving clues on when to change the emotional direction and thus add to player enjoyment. Action and dialog are broken up into 'beats,' which are classified by function and emotional impact. For dramatic dialog, the terms 'petitioner' and 'granter' are used. The author credits Michael Shurtleff, "Audition," an acting text, and the film editor Walter Murch, as relayed by Michael Ondaatje, "The Conversations." I found the application of the techniques gave valuable insights, though I think it important to be familiar with at least 'Hamlet' and 'Casablanca.'

The diagrams supplement the text. From time to time they contradict it, and this subtracts from the book's overall worth.

Non-gamers: GM means game master, and is a generic term that cuts across table-top role playing games (RPGs). The GM has primary, but not exclusive, responsibility for narrative setting and development and derivatively for player fun. PC = player character: one acted by a player in an RPG. NPC = non-player character: one acted by the GM in an RPG.

Patrick says

Setting this one back on the shelf until I have more time. This is a serious bit of literary analysis and deeper than my casual reading time allows right now. I will return to this after things calm down a bit and I have the time for serious reading.

John says

A fascinating look at story design - written with an eye toward tabletop RPGs, but suitable for anyone interested in story structure. Laws' contention is that good stories are built on beats that alternate between hope (getting the protagonist closer to an emotional / tangible revelation) and fear (taking the protagonist further from the same). He documents this by diagramming HAMLET, DR. NO, and CASABLANCA using his invented iconography.

It's not a perfect system: I quibble with a few of his classifications of scenes in Hamlet, for instance. And there are notable errors in editing that render some of the diagrams and discussions hard to follow. But those aside, it's an eye-opening exercise.

Recommended for gamers and writers.

Benjamin says

Robin D. Laws is a game designer and author who I like a lot; he's also a cineaste and a cook. Which all adds up to: this is a guy who is serious about his enjoyment.

I finally got around to reading this book (borrowed from an improviser friend and fellow nerd -- what a capacious Venn diagram that is), which is all about "a system for analyzing stories tuned to the needs of roleplaying gamers."

(Laws gives that summary in the section wonderfully titled "How to Pretend You've Read This Book.")

In other words, it's a system for analyzing the beats of scenes that modulate (or not) our emotional states, mostly along a hope/fear axis, and mostly around the protagonist's dramatic and procedural aims.

(Or, in other, other words: this feels like a dry-run for Laws's game Hillfolk, which revolves around beats between characters and how they get resolved either positively or negatively. As such, the pair demonstrate how nonfiction/analysis can lead to creative work, and vice versa.)

Laws nicely lays out a bunch of types of beats, starting with the primary beats for him:
procedural (revolving around characters' external goals),
dramatic (relating to their internal needs).

He then adds a number of interesting, less common beats:
commentary,
anticipation,
gratification,
bringdown,
pipe,
question,
reveal.

(I'm writing them all down so I have a place where I can reference them easily.)

What's really interesting about this to me is that Laws goes on to identify the beat by both its type and its emotional modulation: a character successfully achieves a procedural goal? The audience is lifted up emotionally on the wings of hope. A character fails to get another character to respect him/her? The audience is brought down into the realm of disappointment and fear.

While these primary beats can swing either way, some of the secondary beat types have a built-in directionality for Laws: gratification is always good, a bringdown is always bad. Laws also notes that some beats might not touch us emotionally at all: a lecture may lay some pipe (i.e., give us some information) but

neither excite us with the promise of fun or depress us with the threats to come.

It's a very interesting system, one which I plan to use to analyze a few stories later. But most of the book is given over to examining three different stories in beat-by-beat detail--*Hamlet*, *Dr. No*, and *Casablanca*. And that's a lot of detail, which sometimes might feel like a slog.

In fact, I was probably most engaged, after learning the general outlines of the system, when I wanted to argue over certain details with Laws. For instance, Laws argues that there's a sequence where one of the secondary villains in *Dr. No* becomes a protagonist. And yet, that feels a little loosey-goosey. Why does that person become the protagonist? Simply because he's the only person we recognize for this sequence and he's entering a place that is (to us) unknown and scary. It would seem to me to be easier to argue that this reveal is set up as a down arrow for our main protagonist, Bond: we see the lair of Dr. No not as a threat to the secondary villain--who we have no reason to attach to emotionally--but as an eventual threat to Bond.

There are a number of times in the book where I felt like that, which probably shows how engaging and interesting this beat-by-beat, hope-vs-fear system of analysis is. Let's see how it holds up and/or what it can tell us about some other stories.

Emmanuel Greene says

Very interesting book! The advice on mixing up the types of story beats will definitely be useful in running an RPG game (assuming I can remember to do so while also keeping track of everything else involved in running the game). Also, it was fun to watch "Dr. No" again while reading along. Very insightful commentary!

Johnny says

In one sense, *Hamlet's Hit Points* is a clever title. The use of the gaming term, "hit points," lets one know that this book about game mastering a role-playing game involves gaming and the reference to Hamlet suggests that it involves learning from literature in terms of improving one's role-playing campaigns. In another sense, *Hamlet's Hit Points* is a misleading title. I fully expected to see characters from *Hamlet*, *Dr. No*, and *Casablanca* in sample statistics for one or two existing systems with some explanation from experienced game designer (and novelist) Robin Laws about how he did it. When I bought the book, I was already curious if he tried to create the statistics and skills for a character in the same way I used to write them for some of the Giants in the Earth-type columns I wrote for *Dragon* magazine (I was the publisher; they probably felt like they had to put me in the magazine.).

So, the disappointment with *Hamlet's Hit Points* is that there is no "crunchiness" with regard to creating game information. The good news is that the book is replete with beat-by-beat descriptions (complete with iconic diagrams) for the three famous stories mentioned above. We wade through "up" beats, "down" beats, and "neutral" beats that either build the story dramatically (dramatic) or move the story toward the conclusion (procedural). Using Laws' methodology (equally useful in writing classes and screenwriting workshops), one can readily see how dramatic tension is built, characterization is strengthened, and how story can be transformed for the game narrative. Why does it have to be transformed? In plays, films, and novels, the storyteller controls what the characters do and say. In role-playing games, the players are the

characters and they OFTEN don't do what you expect them to do. [I guess this happens in writing as well. Dorothy Sayers used to say that she never "converted" Lord Peter Wimsey to Christianity, even though she was quite devout, because she said that he would never do that.] As a result, Laws reminds the readers that he prefers the term "storymaker" to "storyteller," even though he regrets coining a neologism (Footnote 2 from Loc. 101).

Now, even though I was disappointed with the lack of crunchiness, I'm not saying that I regret buying the eBook. There *is* some solid advice for gamemasters (although, for me, the practical insights were mostly revealed in the discussion of *Dr. No*, as much as I enjoyed the literary and dramatic insights for the play and the other movie. What do I mean? One of the beats is when Bond arrives at the airport and the viewers see that he is being observed. Well, there is a point-of-view (POV) problem in the game. No one knows they are being watched unless someone makes an Awareness check and the GM says, "You feel like you might be under surveillance." Laws notes that the division between audience and character knowledge "...is the engine of Hitchcockian suspense." (Loc 1551). He goes on to indicate that in "...a gaming context it's often more effective for the characters to be aware that they're being watched..." (Loc 1554) and "...even more effective if an obstacle prevents them from immediately catching and identifying their watchers." (Loc 1555)

Later, he identifies the scene where one of the watchers to which Bond is oblivious shoots at him and the bullet hits a passing car. Laws suggests that this might be a result of a saving roll or even the expenditure of a narrative resource (karma chit?) to cancel out a hit (Loc 1816). Laws also waxes eloquently (and quite rightly, I believe) about the overt sexism in the early Bond films which doesn't quite fit modern sensibilities.

Speaking of terrific insights, I had watched *Casablanca* several times before I noticed that the early command to round up suspects balances the famous line about rounding up the usual suspects at the end (Loc 3011). And, in terms of practical observations, Laws talks about the importance of foils and supporting characters while dealing with the colorful and sometimes comic characters in this great film.

At the conclusion, Laws explains how to find and diagram the beats of a narrative, how to use them to analyze your sessions and campaigns (Loc 4330), and how to use "pipe," his term for the pipeline which is exposition—telling the audience (or your characters) what they need to know. He cautions against putting too many pipe beats in a sequence (Loc 4425). In spite of my disparagement in the opening paragraph, I'm glad I purchased this insightful book. I just wish it had contained a little more useful material in the midst of the dramatic analysis.

Igor says

With a heavy heart I give this useful book only three stars. The described framework for analyzing the flow of the mood by dividing them into atomic beats of different flavors is brilliant and helps stay aware of the balance of the story a GM (or a writer - the system is universal) is cooking. It is, however, delivered in an excruciatingly boring package. Only with a lot of effort I was able to plow through a beat after beat after beat of three different works, gradually losing focus and being constantly tempted to skip entire pages. This should have been a lengthy blog post or perhaps a series of smaller ones. In its current form, the book is as engaging as a drawn-out and dull lecture would be.

Scott wachter says

new favourite quote 'unhappy nazis are always an up arrow'

Sean says

An interesting method to improve storytelling by identifying ways to share narrative dramatic information in a way that assists in creating a satisfying pace in storytelling.

A short system of definitions is introduced, and then seen executed as the beats of *Hamlet*, *Dr. No*, and *Casablanca* are examined. Just these sections alone is enough to provide new perspective on these works.

The system seems useful, but perhaps the book is misleading as a RPG text. The idea comes from the author's blog originally, and that makes sense. This book is an interesting idea but lacks a robust structure. It feels like a suggestion of guidance, not actually a new tool.

Jason says

I went back and forth on the value of this book to me as a reader, an RPG player, and a GM. I was very excited to get it since it is so highly spoken of by people I respect. Once it was in my hands, I was disappointed to find that it contained what seemed to me so little actionable insight. But once I finished the first section on *Hamlet*, I turned back to the first page and read everything again.

This is one of those books that gives you proportionally what you put into it. The more you give yourself to the book and to its basic premise, the more you can draw from it, and the more you can let it spark your imagination and the possibilities to be had during play.

My disappointment with the book has mostly to do with the final section on *Casablanca*. This section makes the fewest connections to gameplay, choosing to focus mostly on the movie itself and its movements. This is not a fair criticism in part because Laws's point of the book is above all to teach readers how to break a movie or story down into its beats. Once his readers get an eye for story and its movements, they will naturally be able to bring those elements into their gameplay. Likewise, the ending section, which in reviews I read declared to be the greatest portion of the book, merely focuses on *how* to do a beat breakdown instead of how to apply that knowledge to your game.

I think that my reaction to the book has to do with my reading it in 2016 instead of 2010 when it was originally published. A lot has changed in the game world in the 7 years since Laws was writing this book. *Fiasco* had only just been published. *Apocalypse World* had not yet made its mark. The world of storygaming has opened up since then and a lot of gamers are approaching their RPGs as storymaking (to use Laws's word) devices first and foremost.

Regardless of the book's limitations, it is still useful, insightful, well-written, and well-presented. No matter where you are in your storymaking games, there is something here to make your play better.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

In this book, Laws introduces a way of analyzing texts as a series of 'beats', mostly procedural or dramatic, which serve either to increase or resolve tension and danger for the protagonists. While this is supposedly a guide for GMing, the advice is rather scanty: alternate upbeat and downbeat, procedural and dramatic moments, and follow a long slide of downs with a triumphant up. The majority of the book (80%+) is a very detailed beat by beat summary of Hamlet, Dr No, and Casablanca.

S. Ben says

This book has a very narrow audience: RPG referees who want their games to have compelling dramatic flow. For us, it is excellent. The secondary audiences might be people who want to *understand* the dramatic flow of their favorite movies and books, and those who are writing screenplays and books; it seems like it would be good for those people as well, but I can't say for sure.

Brian Rogers says

This is just bloody wonderful. It's hard to really describe past the actual description, but many of the thing in here drove me to make Mech and Matrimony, my Jane Austen meets Giant Robots RPG and one of the top 5 gaming experiences in my life, as the mechanics were drawn directly from his observations on emotional beats. It's a great book for anyone who takes their GMing seriously.

Mario says

After a recommendation by Pablo Hidalgo, I started reading this incredible book about dissecting stories into beats, in order to better comprehend the rhythm and variance of the hope/fear cycle that allows us to bond with the story.

It does so by using three examples of great storytelling: Shakespeare's Hamlet, as the title suggests; Terence Young's Dr. No film, and Michael Curtiz' masterpiece, Casablanca. Robin Laws explains every beat of the works in order to point the procedural or dramatic relevance of each, how does it affect the story in an upwards, downwards or lateral movement, and what kind of importance to the plot do they have.

Not only this book helped me understand Hamlet in a completely different way, but it also should serve as a starting point to analyze other works of art, and in turn, apply the lessons of cadence and balance in your own RPG sessions.

Highest recommendation possible!!!
