

Upwind Hype!

I'm excited for [Upwind](#) the new storytelling game of uncharted skies from [Biohazard Games](#). When I heard the first actual play "[Out of Curiosity](#)" from [RPPR](#) as they play tested the game I wasn't quite sure what I had just listened to. I've listened to unsummed hours of actual plays but I had not ever heard something quite like it before.



My ears recognized the Airship setting and the prominence of magic, the presence of an advanced fallen civilization, and other fantasy tropes. Initially nothing about the setting, its little details like no sun or stars, the particulars of the races and the histories, nothing really grabbed me by the roots and hoisted my imagination to new heights of wonder and excitement. Even the elevator pitch of "Ralph Bakshi's *Wizards* has a head on collision with Disney's *Treasure Planet* and you put out the resulting fire with a whole lot of studio Ghibli, mainly *Castle in the Sky*," didn't really do anything for me. I don't want this piece to be about what didn't do it for me but what DID do it for me.

I'll have to track it down again but it was during an interview where Jeff Barber is answering questions about Upwind and Blue Planet and he mentions this moment during a play, the resolution mechanic of the Q-system, where the stakes are decided. And instead of a simple, win and you do the thing, lose and you fail to do the thing, the consequences of each of these because beautiful stories and outcomes that existed or didn't exist depending on the outcome of the play. "Perhaps you defeat the pirates, rescue the princess and earn a blaze of rank from the Brotherhood Commander if you win but if you lose, then you still defeat the pirates, but half your crew is massacred the princess thinks you are a coward and you still earn the blaze of rank but in your heart you know you don't deserve it." That's when the setting, the mechanics, the game that is *Upwind* earned my Kickstarter money.

Jeff seems to have fully embraced the failing forward philosophy in his role of game master, in every AP I've listened to where he is running the game his stakes of the

players lose rarely include a simple “you fail to do the thing” oftentimes the players still succeed but at a game changing cost. One dramatic example occurred during an RPPR game that he ran for seven players the player wished their character to be able to defeat the other pirate crew with a bolt of magic that electrified the ship and forced an end to the four ship conflict while the counter-stakes were that the player still succeeded in zapping the enemy vessel but that there was an explosion on board which caused enough damage and distraction that the other two pirate vessels were able to escape.

The reason I come back to roleplaying games and continue to play them is because for me the story is everything. Having a system that almost doubles the amount of story being told just fills me up with a white light of hope. It isn’t that both outcomes happen but both outcomes, each stake of the moderator and of the player is verbalized and can be pictured and desired by either party.

And these stakes must be negotiated for between the moderator and the player. They can double down, back down, revise and alter their plan depending on what kind of story they are willing to push for. And all these things are continually keeping the game focused on the game. As a listener, it feels as though even when meta elements such as the suits, abilities, stakes, raises, and other mechanical bits are being discussed and considered it is still people playing the game rather than the system. Each item is only being considered for the narrative effect that it will have since the crunchy bits of each skill are only differentiated by their names and not their mechanical effect.

I guess what I am kind of saying is that as much as the game is about sky ships and knights and magic and all that jazz, it is also about your luck, skill, and creativity as a person playing cards. After a game of *Upwind*, I imagine the post commentary could be along the lines of “I thought we were done for, but I played my four of diamonds, used my knights cache for a jack and then Billy Jean aided me with a two, the GM was showing a king and a three off the bat but their crown card was only a two so we snaked right past that one.” I feel that the agency the cards give the players allow them to feel that they contributed to the story and not their skill at rolling dice or the modifiers on their swords, but their management of resources and card strategy make each play heroic.

Poker is an international televised leisure sports event, and just as a person can win the pot, each play in *Upwind* allows the story to go forward and empowers the players to feel that same satisfaction in winning as a professional card player.

When I think of the stories I want to tell with *Upwind*, or the Q-system, I can’t reach past the premise. Much of my style as a GM is improvised. I like to draw from a pool of characters and possible motivations, but the mechanics of traditional procedural incremental games have me whetted to a certain paradigm. I feel that both *Upwind*, for its amazing setting and engaging tropes will help my free both my players and myself of the old model and embrace the new collaborative meta style. I’m excited for the conclusion of this Kickstarter and looking forward to receiving my pledge reward. I want to run the game most and then I want to dig into the guts of the Q-system, bathe in the blood and create my own beast to facilitate or enhance a different genre of play.

As I finish this writing, *Upwind* has been funded and reached the stretch goal I thought most interesting, that is “The Three Beasts” mini-campaign tie-in written by Ross Payton. The APs are up on RPPR and showcase the system nicely and might mirror your typical style, some plays seem incremental but some are truly sweeping and sum whole scenes or sets nicely. It’s fantastic that the system is flexible, handles a high player count well, is easily mod-able for difficulty, and encourages collecting artisan playing cards to match

whatever theme you may choose to run, be it the default *Upwind* setting or your homebrew hack of the Q-System.

The [Kickstarter](#) ends November 10th and I urge you to pledge what you are comfortable with in support of this amazing product.

[You can pour through all the podcasts yourself courtesy the Biohazard Games *Upwind's* download section.](#)