

play

Commons and Dragons

Roleplaying for the generative commons





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Introduction

Using the logic of role-playing games, Commons and Dragons allows players to simulate commoning situations to configure and test forms of governance, regulations, laws and legal structures. This will enable participants to make informed assessments and choices in their actual practices.

Inspired by the famous Dungeons and Dragons, the distinctive characteristic of C&D is the possibility - in the hands of the players - to refer to real situations in terms of setting, objectives of the game sessions, actors involved. The aim of the game is not to win but to explore possibilities and solutions: the role-playing formula was also chosen because of the opportunity it offers of avoiding competitive logic in favour of playfulness and collaboration. In addition, intending to use the game as a tool for evaluation and study, C&D allows you to learn about and explore existing regulations and legislative instruments specific to the juridical context in which you are playing. It will be up to the Game Master to prepare the necessary materials to deepen the contents that will emerge during the session, in the form of links to relevant websites or involving players with legal knowledge.

In particular C&D has been conceived to allow the exploration of the legal structures and laws supporting the establishment and the activities of commons oriented initiatives. To complete the preparation of the gaming session have a look at gE.CO's Juridical Toolkit.

How to use these instructions

The instructions presented in the following pages should be understood as basic indications. If you are interested in regular use of C&D, for popularising, educational or recreational purposes, we suggest you deepen your knowledge of role-playing techniques by consulting the vast repertoire of materials available online: dedicated channels and videos, books, and blogs are of great help to improve your game sessions.

However, we remind you to always check that the adaptation of ideas and elements learned from other games corresponds to your aims and the type of audience, to remain accessible and constructive in the spirit of C&D.

Purpose and mission of the game session

Purpose of a session of Commons and Dragons is that of using the simulation process of the game to explore scenarios that could possibly concern commons and commoning practices, to test and learn about organisation, governance and juridical forms. For example, the game could be used by commoners working on the organisation of their activities, by individuals curious to better understand the logics of commoning, or by commoners willing to introduce the commoning practices to a large audience.

Every game session will be organised around a main fictional mission: a result to achieve, an event to organise, the identification of new funding systems, the re-organisation of internal governance, the choice of the most appropriate juridical structure, etc. Such a mission will be at the core of the plot that the Game Master - as described in the following sections - is supposed to design and will always be communicated at the beginning of the session.

Players and duration

A C&D game session involves two to more players. Although there is no maximum number, ideally, the number of players should be small enough to allow everyone to express themselves. As this is a game aiming to simulate real situations, the number of players and the choice of characters should also reflect the conditions to be explored, whether those of existing commoning initiatives or imagined conditions. If the real involved actors are the neighbours, the councillor for culture, the artists and the commoners, it would be helpful to reproduce the same situation in the game session.

The game always involves the identification of a Game Master (GM), i.e. the director of the game session, and other characters played by the participants. More detailed information on the role of the GM and on designing the characters are provided in the following section.

As far as the duration of a game session is concerned, this can be highly variable: the exploratory purpose of C&D makes it difficult to define precise times. However, it can be said that the session ends when the explorations and information that have emerged meet the objectives set. Sessions can also result in a series of playthroughs if the goals have not been met; or if you intend to continue playing using the same setting and characters.

example of interaction

Game Master: you discover an attractive empty building, not very far from the little park of the neighbourhood where teenagers usually gather after school. The building looks abandoned, but the gate of the property is not permanently closed.

Alexander, the activist: I think it may be interesting to take the risk and have a look at the building, though I am not sure when I am going to find it open

Game Master: well, you could always ask the lovely old lady that lives just in front, she spends quite some time in her garden with her friends playing cards...she will probably know something

A: that's a good idea. In fact, I can count on my communication skills to approach her and get the information I need ...hoping she would trust my good intentions!

GM: in fact, she is just coming back home after a walk with her dog...

A: good afternoon Madame, can I ask you something, would you have five minutes?

Lady Living in the Neighbourhood: good afternoon. Yes, you can ask unless you try to sell me something or convince me to sign some last-minute petition...

A: oh no, not at all...in fact, I am a community organiser, and I recently moved to the neighbourhood... And I would like to propose something for the empty building there, but I am not sure how I could look inside...do you know anything about the owner?

LLN: oh, that building, it used to be an industrial laundry, but it stopped working five years ago or six....the owner is somebody from Argentina, I think he never comes here...

A: I see...but sometimes the gate is open...

LLN: yes, they have somebody coming to check everything is in order...they usually come once per month, you should ask them ... but you know, on the back the fence is broken, in case you want to have a quick look...

A: oh, that's interesting, thank you for telling me! However, I think it may be risky...and I need to check safety conditions inside the building as well, so I will really need to meet their guardian

Later on, the need to discuss and evaluate safety could lead players to discover more about their responsibilities in case of temporary occupations and those of the owner in the long run.

The Game Master

The Game Master (GM) is the organiser, the director, the negotiator, the arbitrator of a roleplaying game. As such, the GM will have the following tasks:

1. Preparing the gaming session. While this is a requirement for roleplaying in general, for C&D some preliminary work is necessary to build knowledge around existing juridical structures and governance systems that may be discussed during the roleplaying session. The GM will prepare the session by creating a plot that will unfold around real or imaginary but likely missions and address the structures and systems relevant to the situation commoners and other participants are interested in exploring. To help you set your first gaming sessions, C&D provides predefined gaming plots inspired by well known and recurring forms of commoning. The elements suggested in the Gaming sheets - from the setting to the interactions with the characters, from the legal arrangements to the session's objectives - are conceived to provide hints and examples and can be used partially or entirely to create other settings and gaming situations.

2. At the beginning of the gaming session, the GM will describe the setting of the gaming session, using his descriptive ability and maps and other materials to allow the players to contextualise the action better and eventually explore the context, looking for alliances, opportunities and forms of support for the strategies staged each time. The more the CM can go into the details of the game scenes, the more the players will be immersed in the semi-real world created by the master, resulting in an engaging and realistic action.

The GM will also indicate the involved characters and provide information concerning the main goals and missions for the participants. Examples of characters may be the

anti-conformist neighbour, the local parish, the grumpy retiree, the disabled person, the narcissistic artist, the conscious community organiser, the enlightened administrator, etc. For the participants, the first task will be to dedicate 10 to 20 minutes to design their characters in detail. The Character sheet that you can download from C&D dedicated webpage will guide participants in creating a well-rounded profile. Have a look at the section "Designing the characters" for more information.

3. During the game. The GM will know beforehand what situations the commoners are most likely to encounter and will have to direct participants with information on what they know or do not know, what challenges they are supposed to deal with, and which resources. A good GM will find the right balance between a basic and a too detailed description of the scene and action. Ideally, while providing a well-structured plot, enough room for improvisation should be left for participants to be creative and get involved by proactively contributing to shaping the game's evolution. While Dungeons and Dragons is about fantastic adventures, remember C&D aims to explore real-life scenarios and options. Therefore, it is crucial that participants could contribute on the basis of their knowledge and experience, as well as of their personality and the motivations of their character. As in real life, participants should be able to make decisions, strategies and ally with other characters depending on their purposes and final goals.

4. Playing occasional characters. Another task of the CM is to play the roles of characters that are not played by any participant, particularly when they do not play a decisive role in the game's development. For example, the accommodating secretary at the town hall counter or the neighbour who is an expert in urban gardens.

Designing the characters

Each player plays a role. The roles can be very different depending on the situation to explore through a game session. At the beginning of each game session (unless they are continuations of previous games), players must define the profile of their characters: profession, personality, skills, social position, political position, etc. C&D's default Character sheets suggest some main characteristics, but nothing impedes adding other valuable elements. The more players can identify with the part, the more influential the simulation will be and the more fun the session will be. It is advisable always to include characters capable of challenging the dynamics of commoning under question. The game aims to use the simulation to test governance and juridical structures in the face of the most difficult, even if unlikely, situations.

Setting the scene

Depending on the purpose for which a game session is organised, the setting may be actual or fictitious. An existing environment makes it possible to refer to the specific characteristics of the building or space that the collective intends to occupy, rehabilitate or renovate, thus considering its impact on governance and resource management. For example, ample disused spaces and small spaces will determine completely different conditions of commoning and resource management. On the other hand, players can choose a fictional setting if the spatial conditions are irrelevant or uncertain or temporary.

Architectural drawings, maps representing the surrounding neighbourhood, and models could be used to describe the directly concerned spaces and increase the awareness and knowledge of the surrounding urban context. These materials may reveal available local resources and community-based associations, spatial limits and potentials that commoning practices may address or involve.

Use of dice

In D&D, dice are thrown whenever the outcome of an action is uncertain. In C&D this could be the case of the result of political negotiation, obtaining funding, passing a

physical test, comparing two players concerning a given skill. In the latter case, each player will add the score given by the dice to the score given by the case-relevant skill (and noted in the character sheet). The total will tell if the player will be able to win a given challenge by reaching a predefined score; or if he will be able to defeat an opponent, overcoming his score. For example, suppose two players are involved in a negotiation process. In that case, the relevant skill may be their negotiation capacity, more or less developed depending on the characters' profile and described by a score on the Character's Sheet. Given the purpose of C&D, the use of dice can be cumbersome. Whereas for D&D, unpredictability and fantastic exploration are at the heart of entertainment, in the case of C&D, the simulation is rather meant to be realistic and to bring in existing legal instruments, calling into question real knowledge and motivations. Throwing dice can undoubtedly add a playful element or allow exploring unexpected and/or undesirable situations: what if the funding is rejected as a result of the dice roll? However, the game can also simply focus on and train the players' strategic skills.

Use of legal glossary and other references

In its Italian version, C&D uses a legal glossary developed by the Department of Law of the University of Turin for the CO3 project: Digital Disruptive Technologies to Co-create, Co-produce and Co-manage Open Public Services along with Citizens. Within the framework of the gE.CO. project, the glossary is available as a PDF file, accessible from the C&D page as an OpenAccess document. Other tools will be accessed as needed during the session, e.g. legal-themed websites, articles, laws and regulations available online. The C&D webpage will highlight best practices and cases of particular interest to allow players to learn about governance models and legal forms that have proved successful. The links to best practices will refer to the FirstLife platform, created to map and catalogue the generative commons collected in the project's database.

C&D will allow other project partners to report on legal instruments and institutions relevant to generative commons in other European countries. Via FirstLife, Commoners themselves will have the possibility to update the list of valuable references and case studies based on their experiences and the emergence of new legal forms.

example of interaction

Game Master: you are one of the artists occupying a big heritage site. Given its dimensions, the building is occupied by three artists' collectives, a local association organising work insertion activities related to catering and restoration services (called Food For Thought), and an association offering temporary shelter to refugees (This Is Home). The building is big enough to host the activities of each of these partners. However, in the spirit of the long journey that brought all these different collectives together, you decided to take care of some common areas together. Not only because they would be too big to be used by a single organisation, but also because this would allow reinforcing your relationship and your sense of commoning.

Finally one day you are asked to organise an art exhibition on climate change. You think the big hall at the centre of the building would provide the ideal setting. As the occupation of the building recently started and many things still have to be discussed, the organisation of this event may, in fact, provide an excellent occasion to test how to manage this sort of situation. So you invite everybody to meet and have a general discussion. Everybody brought some food, and the atmosphere is thrilling and pleasant.

Artist and Event Organiser: So thank you for coming, as I shortly mentioned in my invitation, I think it would be nice to organise the exhibition I described in this building. This would be a great occasion for us to gain some visibility and help our funding campaign and an opportunity to design our governance system.

This is Home social assistant: it looks an excellent idea indeed. We should discuss the duration, how to safely organise the exhibition, and how this may interfere with other activities in the building...And indeed, this is a good occasion to set up a system that we could use in the future.

Food For Thought: Yes and perhaps our organisation can take care of the catering? This would allow us to gain some money...

Second Artist: that looks great, I agree. However, please remind some artists do use that space for weekly activities with the inhabitants in the neighbourhood. I am one of those, and it would be difficult for us to operate in a different part of the building.

AEO: yes, you are right... what would be the best decision? Any other space of this building would not be that good for our exhibition. Should we vote?

TIH: I don't think voting would be constructive...I don't think what we do here is a matter of majority but of joining forces and resources, and I am convinced we will find an agreement that will make everybody happy

FFT: I like this spirit. Both activities are essential for us, and it would be not easy to decide which should prioritise. Most importantly, indeed, this would not be the spirit.

An exciting variation of this evolution may be that the choice between voting and discussing and finding a joint agreement is made by rolling dice. The rest of the interaction could be very different depending on the result.

SA: yes, I agree and this could be a system we may use in all sorts of decisions...

FFT: well I think it would depend. In some cases, it may be complicated to bring everybody to an agreement, and at the same time, a decision may be required. Also, imagine only one person does not agree on something: we cannot paralyse the organisation for one person disagreeing. So I think we would need to make a list of decisions to be taken by building consensus and decisions to be taken simply by majority

