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Interview with Ron Edwards

How would you define your work? Do you define yourself as a writer, a game designer, a developer?

**My work in hobby publishing is defined precisely as self-publishing. That means I don't need to worry about labels like "role-playing game," i.e., whether my titles qualify for that term or not. The only criterion for my work is that I own it and take responsibility for its published form.**

**Regarding this work, I identify myself as an active tabletop role-player ("gamer," whatever you want to call it), first and most completely. Some role-players including myself have a compulsion to design more games, in addition to playing the ones they have. This requires writing. And some of these, including myself, are further compelled to publish what they design and write.**

**I think of these compulsions, especially if one has them both, as a personality disorder. Vincent Baker phrased it best when he says that the games somehow appear in his head, and he must write them down in order to remove them, to prevent them from driving him insane. That describes my experience perfectly.**

**The text of Sex & Sorcery includes a lot of thoughts about gender among characters and among real people. While that supplement was in production during 2002, I'd been thinking about possible rules which invoked these issues, and our game group had been playing Hero Wars with a heavy emphasis on the demon-goddess Thed … and in the middle of the night, I sat straight up in bed and said out loud, "Trollbabe!" I designed the basic ideas for the majority of that game, which features female-only protagonists, in the next twenty-four hours, and it was published in 2003.**

**Similarly, I'd already invoked a morally-grey, politically-dissenting strain of spy fiction in my Narrativism: Story Now essay (2003), and that led me to read more about Berlin during the Cold War. Sometime in 2004 I came upon Markus Wolf's Man Without a Face, and upon finishing it, I knew that I had to begin a completely different line of writing and design, whose first book is Spione (2006), which are written as non-gaming, non-fiction political books but include unusual games as their final chapters. Two years later, I'd taken classes in German and visited Berlin five times.**

**These urges were almost entirely unwelcome and literally overturned my life, as they continue to do. I'd planned to publish no more games after finishing Sex & Sorcery, hoping to have satisfied a trivial urge and to submerge again in the sea of being an ordinary gamer. Although people call these creative experiences "inspiration," to me it feels more like demonic possession, if that were a real thing. If it weren't for the euphoria of actually publishing the material in functional shape, I'd be in therapy to make it stop.**

**Reviewing your question, I find that your term "writer" bears special attention. Part of my particular disorder is that I can't manage to silence or remove the interfering content from my mind unless I write it myself, but often that isn't enough. I have to write it so that others can connect deeply with my own sensations regarding the content. In other words, I cannot merely write down the game, I must write in a way which explains it to others and which can be exciting for at least some of them.**

In your opinion, what can you do with RPGs you cannot do with any other media?

**This is less a matter of specific achievement and more about medium. Literature has written prose, cinema has moving visual content, painting has surfaces and pigments … RPGs, or the subset for**

that term that I'm interested in, have their own distinct medium. I call it "shared imagined space," composed of dialogue in one form or another. It has fictional content (like literature, cinema, theater) but operates more like music in terms of producing and enjoying it.

Exactly what you want to do with this medium isn't fixed, any more than it's fixed for any other. Just as you can paint whatever you want, and in a wide variety of social contexts and purposes, you can "play for" whatever you want.

That said, it's true that each distinctive medium allows its own distinctive achievements. If we're talking about the excitement of fictional conflicts (technically "drama" although that word is over-used), then the shared imagined space medium produces some startling results. I think this application achieves some things you cannot get from literature, cinema, or theater.

Generally, it permits the creation of stories that individuals would not be able to produce by themselves, and which they find exciting both to create and to experience – instead of the definitive transitive distance between creator and audience, it exists precisely at the point where they are the same thing.

However, I want to distinguish this medium from "consensual storytelling," which is a group exercise in composing a story in the literary or a similar pre-existing medium. I'm talking about techniques which are consensual in use, but not necessarily so in outcome – much as a group of people agree to play a given card game, but the outcomes during the card game aren't pre-set or determined simply because we all agree about it. Instead, what I'm talking about relies partly on unpredictable results, arising through a wide variety of techniques, and instead of focusing on what you *want* to happen (which usually breaks down into social manipulation and bullying anyway), it focuses on what *is* happening.

The simultaneous author/audience effect produces remarkable experiences, when thoughtful techniques are employed. Role-playing as a hobby discovered this effect early, especially for the goal of enjoyable competition and challenge-solving.

My games Spione and Shahida (and in development, Amerikkka) demonstrate this in a different way. I've seen political learning experiences arise from playing them which could not be or realized or articulated in ordinary conversation. Ordinary conversations about political history, spies, security agencies, terrorists, and similar quickly fall into reactive, empty language, which is why people say not to discuss politics. However, playing these games of mine bypasses and even disintegrates that reaction, yielding insights and questions instead.

How would you define your work as a publisher at Adept Press? (for example your daily tasks, your influence on published games).

I don't think "define" is the right verb; I can only describe what it was and is like without relying on definitions. When I began doing this in 1996, I thought of my efforts as a return to grassroots creativity, without the need for external validation through a specific publication and distribution process. I promoted the idea that the hobby had always been and still was reliant on ordinary gamers who happened to design games, not on elevated designers who bestowed games on gamers separate from them. The point was not to create a generation of DIY-design, but to call attention to the fact that it was already there, and had always been there.

I was not alone in this but I did happen to play a leadership role in identifying and promoting it as a good thing. Back then (remember, I first put Sorcerer on-line in 1996!), my daily tasks were equally divided among discovering the diversity of existing games, including playing them; working on my own designs, including playing them too; discovering and developing viable economic options for

publishing them on-line (this was pre-Google, pre-Paypal, barely after Amazon.com); and engaging anyone who was interested in critical dialogue about both design and publishing.

Today, my daily tasks are similar, but I think the struggle to bring grassroots game design into the light was successful. I am especially satisfied to see that people who positioned themselves against me or the Forge in subcultural, identity-based terms are themselves exemplifying that same message, with pride of their own. That's precisely what I mean by saying "we won" regarding the Forge. The point was to put grassroots creativity front-and-center, and to remove the perception of marginal or unprofessional status from author-ownership.

What are your reasons for publishing a game and not another? How do you make your choice?

Those decisions are definitely ruled by the compulsive factors I mentioned above. Sometimes other factors are involved, such as recognizing a current spike in specific techniques in the ongoing ferment of design or in enthusiasm for a given topic. But those are factors that get folded into the unpredictable urges, rather than deliberate policy decisions for the next project. As I said earlier, I'd probably be quite happy if I didn't have a "next project," but I've resigned myself. For example, in the spring of 2010, probably due to having studied the history of Abrahamic religions as part of writing Shahida, I wrote not one but three playable documents illustrating pretty intense stuff about religious experience and practice.

How would you define your editorial policy? What makes your company different from another?

As stated above, creator ownership defines Adept Press. This means that my company is different from any other specifically and only because I am a particular person.

How did you decide to create *Sorcerer*? What did you want to do with this RPG you cannot find in any other? What was your main inspiration? What were your goals when you created this game?

I've answered these questions in other interviews and essays, including the annotations to the recently re-issued book, and it's a lot to summarize here. The following text is lifted from another interview I'm conducting right now for [name deleted; the interview was not posted by the site]:

> Role-playing produces made-up stuff: characters, doing stuff, stuff happening, cause-and-effect in that fiction … basically "the fiction" is a pretty good term for it.
>
> When is the fiction a story? Two things make it a story. First, if the fiction gets real people's attention, which happens if a recognizable real-life human problem is somehow involved or invoked, even if the characters and situation are incredibly fantastic or impossible. Second, if the fiction includes escalating events which ultimately resolve the problem, in any way. (All this is Lit 101, boring version. I'm not pretending anything different.)
>
> Now here's the key: there's no kind of role-playing that *can't* make a story. Nor is there any reason that it *should*.
>
> The question is whether people are there to do that as a first priority, strictly as a matter of preference and mood. Now I'm not talking about fiction at all, but me and you and Joe and Sally at the table.
>
> Because let's say I don't feel like that priority today and instead I really want to go to town on my fun of problem-solving under fire, even competition. I want to be at the table with people who are not only doing this too, but appreciating how well I do it (or how hosed I get when I try). Maybe what we end up doing at the table makes a story by the above definition, maybe it doesn't, and I don't really care either way. On the other hand, let's say that you're sitting at that table too, and although your character is absolutely perfectly suited for this game in rules terms, just like mine, you really do want the fiction to have that story quality, and to see it created and collectively appreciated in play.

See what I mean? I see no real question about what a story is (I'm not a Deconstructionist), so the only question is whether we want to enjoy making one in play, as a first priority, as opposed to any other first priority. This turns into trouble at the table if and when our first priorities clash.

But don't stop there. Role-playing history has landed us with 100 ways to mis-read what I just wrote. Stick with me for the next part.

Now, let's talk about people who like stories but don't want to risk seeing them made in play. I consider them cowards. They want a grand story to be there in play, period, and crucially, they know pretty much how they want that story to go. Therefore if outcomes of some kind at the table get in the way of that intent (or plan, or control), or if someone at the table does something counter to it, then this disruption must over-ridden.

You see what I did there? I'm talking about the difference between being there to experience and create a story, *using* the outcomes at the table, vs. the experience of your character being in someone else's guaranteed story, *despite* the outcomes at the table. Shocking, horrifyingly, the whole word "story" in role-playing culture has become associated with the latter, not the former.

How can that be? Why is one person slapping down others' story-excited role-playing and overriding the systemic outcomes at the table called "story-oriented?" Why is the system specifically called "Storyteller" the most egregious railroading mechanism known to the hobby? How can it be that this "story-oriented GM" play must control my every contribution at that table, so I *can't* make this kind of fiction my priority in the moment?

This is why the word "story" engenders rage and counter-attack from many role-players – not because they don't like stories or don't want them in play, but because they don't like being pushed around and rendered a penny-whistle at the table of the person who plays the Moog organ.

The rage is even fiercer from people *want* their characters to have agency and do dramatic, passionate stuff in the fiction. I understand this response perfectly because I share the very same indignation, but the historical hobby-result turned into a catastrophe: the priority of enjoying agency, excitement, and consequential action had – by the 1990s – been completely obliterated in the collective hobby-mind. The idea that you can get a story specifically by not planning that story was absent from any text and from any dialogue at all.

Sorcerer unabashedly states that story creation through play itself, through characters with agency, with unplanned and non-negotiable outcomes using the game mechanics, is possible and easy.

It's easy to understand the shocked resistance I met, not from those who didn't want stories in their games at all, but from those loved their self-image of the Good GM the Storyteller, who takes care of the game to make sure horrible players don't "ruin" the story. To people who preferred the other players at their tables to be infantilized and for their allegedly brilliant stories to be kept safe, and to publishers who'd defined their whole product line by delivering canned stories and telling people not to let the players mess with them, I was the devil. I understand that reaction perfectly and openly defied it: it's cobra vs. mongoose.

However, even those who wanted what I'm offering reacted with fear and confusion. Talking about this with role-players is nearly impossible. The disappearance of vocabulary for making stories with agency, without full control by anyone, is tragic. It's as if slavers called themselves the Freedom Lovers, and then bizarrely, the people who despised slavery bought into that and said they hated freedom. So then I come along and say, "Be free, I have some ideas how," and the very people who hate the slavery most say, "Freedom Loving! Aggh! Never!"

It's easy to get over this with only a little bit of non-hysterical interaction. No one who actually read my essays or talked about them and real play with me, ever made the mistake of thinking I'd call externally-railroaded plot "story-priority role-playing." It's patently obvious that I think it's the precise antithesis of any such play. But a person isn't going to understand this until he or she stops hyperventilating.

When I say I want to play story-centric role-playing, as a first priority (and again, *when and if* I want to, not always), I'm not talking about having a den-daddy Good GM ™ who can fold me into his or her brilliant story *for* me, so all I have to do is provide colorful dialogue. That isn't story-prioritized role-playing at all, because at that table, what we *do* is by definition *never* going to make the story – it's already in place as imposed by one person at the table, or (just the same) being improvised by one person at the table.

I must stress that this whole topic is merely about preference and mood. Wanting to make stories via the fiction of role-playing isn't a privileged or better priority. It's one of the possible priorities when engaged in this cool form of fiction-making, and that is all. In order to answer sensibly, I'm reading your difficult phrase "a gaming situation" very much with "<u>a</u>" as an individual time, not as a representative, blanket, or archetypal thing.

That said, my answer is, sometimes a lot, and sometimes not at all. It's a matter of my preference at the moment.

If it's a lot, i.e., if I'm in that particular mood, then I look for a game to play that reinforces that desire, for me and everyone else. No game can replace that desire, which is a creative and social thing, but its moving parts can be better-suited to it than another's, or it can have nifty features to reinforce the desire in a particular way.

Again, and to reinforce my point above, when I'm feeling that way, I totally don't want play which *imposes* story, in the sense that one person at the table is empowered to direct other characters' actions to conform with an intended outcome. Doing that isn't always personally and creatively abusive, but in my experience nearly all of it is, and even when it's not, I simply dislike it. So I avoid groups which seem to rely on it, and I avoid games which clearly include that imposition as an assumption for play.

Let's not forget that I might be in a completely different mood and have a completely different preference at some other time. If so, then I look for a different game that fits my current priority better. Similarly, I'll then pick among those for techniques that seem pretty cool for something specific about playing that way.

This all works the other way around, too – if someone else is already proposing a game, I say to myself, "Can I get behind the creative priorities and collective enjoyment this game best reinforces?"

All of this arose from developing Sorcerer led me to "this," or rather, to designing toward my desire to play with this priority. This goes back all the way to 1985 when I began organizing long-term Champions groups, but really kicked in about 1990 when I realized I had a bunch of proto-game notes all over the place (like many other people, then and now) … and then even more so upon encountering a number of game designs in the early 1990s, the ones I referenced in Sorcerer. I hit upon demon-centric, sorcerer-only play as the most uncompromising model for what I wanted in 1992.

What Sorcerer as originally written demonstrably did and still does is open doors to the kind of story-prioritized play I described above: not planning a story, but making a story via characters with agency, subject to non-negotiable rules outcomes. I had hoped back in 2000-2001 that the number of people who liked those particular doors would eventually justify a 500-book print run; it did not occur to me that any more people than that would be interested, or to plan for more printings.

Nor did I think it would have sparked interest in people who said, "There are doors like that? No! Really? How do they work?" Against my expectations at the time, that second audience – characterized by surprise and curiosity – is still there, a never-ending stream of arrivals, for the same reasons as before. Indoctrinated in story control as "story role-playing," they are simultaneously intrigued and fearful, and the raw defiance of the book as written – kneeing railroading in the groin – is exciting.

You are the co-founder of the Forge. Is it an important influence for you?

All these things are tied together historically: beginning with the development of Sorcerer, then on-line commerce in late 1996, on-line dialogue at the Gaming Outpost, reviews and discussions in zines and other websites by 1998, my first on-line essays, and the founding of Hephaestus' Forge with Ed Healy in 1999. The Forge's further development occurred during Sorcerer's transition to book publishing, especially 2000-2001, and the process of visiting GenCon for the first time and attending GTA in 2000 led to the Adept Press booth in 2001, and expanding what we did there into the Forge booth in 2002.

The Forge was immensely influential to me for exactly the reason Ed and I had hoped in the beginning: to discover and connect the huge, barely-visible diversity of game design happening in almost every hobbyist's group and existing mainly in their notebooks and isolated webpages. My

My initial experience was pure discovery of how many game designs were scattered around the internet, which at that time didn't have Google, very few centralized locations for links and interactions. This discovery included the exposure of many published games that were typically described as "dead" in hobby culture but which were now revealed to be actively played – Marvel Super Heroes (1983) is a good example. It was a strong lesson in how strong real play culture was and how different it was from looking across the titles available in the stores, or discussed in industry-centric events like the Origins Awards.

The second influence, which began with the discussions I led at the Gaming Outpost beginning in 1999, was an open and thoughtful exchange of ideas with like-minded people. These threads have unfortunately been lost in a series of server crashes, but they established a foundation of dialogue and constructive disagreements which would eventually contribute to what I'd call, in 2004, the Big Model. However, this discussion was completely integrated with ongoing discussions of what we were playing, what we had played, and what some of us were trying to design.

It may be hard to believe how much I was playing from about 1996 through 2006 – three or four active groups at once, some of them dedicated to short-term play and others to long-term play, some of them very stable in membership and others deliberately flexible, sometimes playing very old games, sometimes very new ones. All of it went into the discussion, most of which is still available to read at the Forge archives.

Such experiences and discussion are inevitably influential. By the time the Forge was active (2001, after Hephaestus' Forge which had no forum), I was in a constant state of inquiry, investigation, attempted conclusions, and critique, as well as enforcing social and intellectual standards rarely observed on the internet.

How would you define a game system, its purpose, its function, its role?

I'll stick closely only to the kind of games I play and design. Here is a transcript of a conversation at the Forge between me and Rocco from 2010, which illustrates the interplay among terms I call Color, Reward, and System. Rocco posted initially to express how unhappy he was about the game he was in (see http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=30197.15 for the original).

> Let's start with Color. I mean, nothing but Color, just the fun and image-rich description of some topic or genre or whatever that you'd like to play. In fact, try to forget anything you ever knew about what role-playing games are about. Never mind dungeons, vampires, or anything of the kind. Never mind any sort of subculture you share with others and the way you may dress or talk when you're with them. Think instead about books, movies, comics, history, biography, sex, politics, music, humor, cartoons, advertising ... anything you like to experience as media. What's a topic that turns you on? Or for that matter, pisses you off to the extent that you'd like to do something about it?
>
> I ask this because role-playing begins with Color, and it is effective only insofar as the content deep

within the Color - a highly personal thing - finds expression through the processes of play. The essence of Exploration, or if we talk in terms of process, Shared Imagined Space, is giving the primal and initial Color some kind of weight among as a group of people who are talking and listening to one another.

Let me know!

*Thank you for your help. I hope  I have clearly understood what you would like to know, so if it's not correct, please let me know. There are many things that I really like. I will start with some of them:*

*1) One of my first love was "The Silmarillion". I like a world inhabited by creature greater than mere human, like the elves of the First Era. The elves were fighting for something greater than themselves and they almost succeded. But what really caught me in the Silmarillion is the impending tragedy always at the door, the sense of sadness of the elves...and at the same time the struggle to succed no matter what (especially, in this regard, the frail human).*
*2) I like the stories told by G.R.R. Martin in " A song of Ice and Fire". I like the idea of an almost real medieval country, rich in misteries but at the same time more real than the Middle-Earth. I also like the political maneuver behind the stories of Martin, seeing them as a struggle to put reason and consequences above mere luck.*
*3) I like a lot of different Japanese Anime. I can cite a few and the reason why: Escaflowne (great story with epic characters struggling against lot of powerful enemies), Neon Genesis Evangelion (mistery and machinations), Trigun ( I really like the character of Vash the Stampede, powerful but at the same time humble), Saint Seya (I was a child and I liked great heroes fighting in shining armors...)*
*4) Star Wars (the films): flashing laserswords and people trying to uphold their higher moral ground in spite of a gritter reality.*

*If you want me to give you some other information on my interests or if I completely missed what you were asking me, I will do my best to correct myself.*

Wow! That is fantastic, exactly what I hoped for. This is one of those times I wish that the internet would just stop for a while so we can talk in peace, and I both apologize (and am myself frustrated) that you've had to wait so long for me to reply. I'll summarize a bit ...

1. Gritty tough reality. Most people have a hard time just getting by. Injustice is wide-spread, and privileged people can indulge their petty power-trips and feuds at the expense of the under-privileged. The privileged are making a tough situation really bad, unnecessarily, because they are really dicks.

2. Moral fibre under fire. There are codes and viewpoints which a person can learn and try to uphold, and they are indeed valid - effective and admirable. But those who uphold these views are marginalized for any number of reasons, and they have an uphill social battle as well as dealing with the more direct dangers and injustices they encounter. A lot of the time, they suffer and die, and their victories are often local, or one small step in a larger struggle they'll never see.

3. Friends and relationships. Other characters' opinions matter. The hero's own values don't really come under question or doubt, or not much, but they can be threatening to others. Or inspire others. The hero is a catalyst for bringing out others' core values, or helping those core values mature for either good or evil.

Conclusion: the most exciting conflicts in this role-playing game (the one you and I wish existed) concern a character who is very powerful, but facing foes which are socially better positioned and absolutely uninterested in his or her ethical views, in circumstances which are very adverse, with the fate of individuals and probably communities at stake. The hero may well be already paying a terrible price for doing this, and has done so in the past, and bears the mental and physical scars for it. The real point is that there is no *guarantee* he or she will prevail this time either. Maybe "prevailing" will consist, after the hero is dead or horribly maimed, and after the victimized people

have been killed and further abused or oppressed, of one small child remembering the event and vowing someday to revive the fight. And even if the hero is victorious, it is likely that he or she will have to flee or otherwise move on, with little reward.

Do I have that right? Would this kind of thing be the personal payoff for you in play, at least if we're talking about this one role-playing game which you and I wish existed?

If so, then it's clear that no version of D&D will facilitate this. Oh, it's *possible* you might get this kind of play with *nominal* use of D&D (again, of whatever version), but only with a group which is 100% on the same page as you, and almost certainly by re-writing and selectively editing the textual rules pretty extensively.

And furthermore, it's clear that your current group is not going to be fun for you to play with. I can't put that any better than you have described yourself.

I suggest one thing: find *two* people who are as jazzed about that material as you are. Maybe one from this group and one from somewhere else, maybe one from this group, maybe from somewhere else entirely. I don't think you need more than that.

That now leads to the next question ... given those exciting moments of play, what *about* them would be most gratifying, especially if everyone at the table were committed to it? (i) Your personal, real-person strategy and guts in using the game system to beat the odds? This would be more like a video game version. (ii) Your personal and perhaps conflicted involvement with the issues exemplified by the conflict, and eagerness to see how it plays out in terms of a thematic statement? This would be more like becoming a weird blend of both author and audience. (iii) Your excitement about the source material cast into a new mold? This would be more like fan-style celebration of the original material or certain aspects of it.

Correct me if I'm off track about any of this. If I am, then ignore the above paragraph.

*I always like to discuss my interests with people who can understand them and like to elaborate on them, even if we disagree on the matter. And don't worry for the timing of your reply, life is busy and every help comes in its own time. I'm happy that you (and everybody else here in the forum) found out enough time to reply to my posts.*

*Now, for the matter at hand: You* <u>perfectly</u> *caught what I meant with my previous list of interesting topics. That's what I really like to see in play.*

*For your second question my answer resides between point II and III. I will explain myself better: as I said earlier I like to discuss principle and ideas important to me with other people. Their inputs can spin my mind on paths I never thought of, or make me reflect upon what I think is "carved in stone" and elaborate on them. Therefore I think that point II is what I'm searching.*

*However, even though principle and ideas are "abstract" matters, they have a strong reflection on the material world, and this interaction goes two-way, from abstract to material and viceversa. Thus the material aspect of certains idea must be reflected upon, and different situations and different settings can lead to very different interaction between "abstract" and "real" aspects of a certain topic. Different source materials can lead to different answer to the same question. And that's something that I like to explore. So maybe, point III is not far away from what I search, even though is not the principal object of my interest.*

*I hope I have made clearer what I meant.*

You're being perfectly clear! I think we may be nearer to Creative Agenda discussion than I thought.

Or more accurately, we may be near to Creative Agenda *preference* discussion *for you*, which as a practical reality is unfortunately quite out of reach as far as your current gaming group is concerned.

I think that you've been clear that we can't be discussing how to make play more fun for you in this group, because it is flatly not fun and shows no sign of possible improvement. This means that our conversation will be more hypothetical than I'd like.

This next part of our conversation may be difficult because I'm asking a weird question. It is ... *if* we were to be role-playing, and if such a character and such scenes were actually becoming the climactic, payoff moments of play, and if those moments were neither constant (because that's exhausting and trivializes them) nor forever in the future (which is frustrating) ...

... then would you like to see some kind of game mechanic that illustrates a *change* in the character when/after that kind of scene happens?

I need to be careful in talking about this because we all reflexively snap back to what's familiar to us instead of thinking about all the possibilities. I'll list some examples from existing games:

1. The chance of death, meaning the final end of that character, and in many cases, the end of that player's investment in the game to date
2. The chance of impairment or limitation of effectiveness for that character
3. The chance or guarantee of improved effectiveness and/or resources for future character actions
4. The chance or guarantee of cosmetic, visual alterations in the character
5. The potential transformation of views, values, relationships, and other psychological aspects of the character, or other characters
6. The potential transformation of features of the setting: other characters, communities, structures and other aspects of locations, or even large-scale phenomena

Casting all your previous experience with role-playing systems to the winds - for example, #1 and #3 are often assumed to be givens, and they don't have to be - which of these, perhaps more than one, and perhaps any you think of that I didn't mention, strike you as the most enjoyable risks and consequences of the kind of scenes we're talking about?

Note as well that the fully negative option exists too: that *no* such mechanic exists, and the character and the setting are not changed by such scenes - at least, not by referring to special numbers or check-marks or tokens or any other kind of procedural features. In that case, all that stuff I numbered above would be worked out or established strictly through people talking without structure, or even through one person's imposed decree. If you would prefer that, then say so.

I suggest that saying "all of them" is not especially insightful or practical. Remember, I'm not talking about whether these things happen, but rather about specifically mechanical aspects of a role-playing system, whose outcomes are strongly influenced by decisions and procedural outcomes during play.

*Ok, I was tempted to say "all of them" but, thinking carefully about the options suggested I think that the two that I would prefer to see in the scenes we were talking about are number 6 (mostly) but also number 5.*

*On the other hand I don't think that number 1 should be a "necessary mechanic". I would like to be the one, also in agreement with the other people playing with me, to decide "when, where and how" a given character ends his usufulness for the scenes/story/idea we are playing.*

I appreciate your patience and attention to the conversation. Clearly, #1-4 can certainly be involved in the hypothetical game we're talking about, whether as narrations using the ordinary mechanics or as subordinate mechanics, leaving #5 and #6 to be "the biggies" in rules terms.

So far, looking over your current ideal game (shall we call it Rocco the RPG?) we have Color, Situation, Reward system and strongly-related mechanics. I submit that we are very nearly done actually designing it. The specific setting - far future, otherdimensional, historical, semi-historical, whatever - actually doesn't matter except insofar as you really like it. The characters, character

creation, and resolution mechanics should all be recognizable as subsets of the reward mechanic, even if in some details they are divorced from it. So whatever you'd pick for starting features of a character, or whatever you'd like to use as a resolution device, well, it's whatever you might enjoy greatly and the only real design-job is to hook it to the methods for generating relevant situations, immediately or eventually, and for applying the reward mechanics at their harshest and most exciting.

I suggest further that your extremely strong answer to my "three possible aesthetic approaches" has already covered the Creative Agenda question: you are aiming at Narrativist play quite coherently - even urgently. A certain attention to genre or source inspiration is no impediment to this.

Are there existing games which you might turn to? I think there are. FATE isn't one of them; its Aspect system is pretty mild compared to (say) The Riddle of Steel or The Shadow of Yesterday and would be anemic in light of the intensity of what you're describing. Certain applications of Burning Wheel would be quite excellent, as would a hack of HeroQuest, but I think your technical preferences are pointing in a different direction, toward The Pool. If you were thinking in terms of animated TV series, which is consistent with some of your inspirations, then Primetime Adventures, definitely a daughter of The Pool, would do the job.

Let me know if you think this discussion has helped.

*I think that this discussion has helped me a lot in understanding my own preferences about RPG, because I was able to express this preferences, examine them once they were written and discuss them with other people. Really, really useful.*

I hope this exchange illustrates the following points:

- Color is the imagined vividness and sense of time-and-place in the fiction. The fiction itself is composed of characters in specific situations.

- Reward is the shared, social enjoyment we get from making and imagining consequential events in the fiction.

- System is the means by which those events arise, resolve, and move along. Mechanics or techniques are the routine and constraining procedures we use to do this.

- One subset of techniques includes reward mechanics, which call attention to and reinforce that particular kind of enjoyment. (Some reward mechanics are minimal, and some are fully social. Others can be quite explicit.)

This is why the very idea of "system doesn't matter" is nonsense on its face. People are at best using this as code for saying that they don't want a particular set of mechanics toward their preferred Reward. At worst, they are supporting a toxic form of play in which the ostensible mechanics are always subject to over-riding by a privileged person at the table.

How would you define roleplay?

That is strictly a legacy term and has no meaningful definition outside of a socially-designated activity. It has a meaning in therapy, a meaning in sex, a meaning in diplomatic training, and probably a bunch of others. Even if you restrict it to hobbies, there's no useful way to start or stop its "proper" application among table-top play, computer gaming, LARP, boffer play, and more. So hobby role-playing is merely a word people do or don't apply to what they're doing; you can't look at an activity and decide whether it's role-playing from its qualities.

I can describe the activity I like, and for which I design, as using spoken dialogue in real time as the creative medium. For instance, playing Monopoly wouldn't count even if we wore hats and spoke

in accents, because the medium is the board and the play-pieces, not an imagined fiction. Technically, consensual storytelling would count except that it is procedurally ineffective. Activities like Jeepform which include physical motions in real-person space, or including writing as part of the dialogue, count as variations in technique.

In your opinion, what are the best RPG(s), in substance and in form? Why?

In substance, those which are most honest in their integration of real-people social goals and their in-play procedures, and which are most ambitious in terms of what genuine emotions and interactions they prompt. In form, those which simultaneously inspire and explain – they provide the means and help spark the drive not merely to read, but actually to play.

I don't see the point in naming specific titles to answer this question. Some games may meet these standards for you and not for me, and vice versa. Some, probably many, fail to meet these standards for anyone.

What are your favorite game systems? Why? / What are your favorite campaigns? Why? / What are your favorite backgrounds? Why?

To me, these aren't separate questions, for the medium I talked about before. Without the right techniques in play, a setting is meaningless; without engaging Color (of which setting is a part), there's nothing to play about.

I'm not really good at "best" lists. Certain games were really great for me at different times. The single game which has influenced me and brought me back to it again and again was The Fantasy Trip - actually that's a blanket term for several titles, one of which was the wonderful microgame Wizard (1978). Champions, specifically 3$^{rd}$ edition (1985) was my main RPG for many years.

It so happens I'm a Gloranthaphile, for example, but that says less about Glorantha and more about my own background and tastes. I don't think my background and tastes are very important topics for an interview.

What do you think of the distinction between story games and RPGs? Between indie RPGs and mainstream RPGs?

The term "story game" began as a social signifier only. It was invented when Andy Kitkowski founded the website of that name, as a center for unconstructed social interaction similar to RPG.net among people who'd been active at the Forge, which did not permit such interaction. As such, it cannot be "thought of," or even judged, as the term is empty of genuine content. I don't blame Andy for this as his attempt to find a neutral term is understandable, but since the term has no content-based definition, there isn't any "distinction" to talk about.

Empty terms tend to acquire meaning through use. "Story game" has taken on identity with games produced for the Iron Game Chef and Ronnies contests in 2005, and more recently with specific authors such as John Harper, Jason Morningstar, and Avery McDaldno. These games are marked by a well-defined starting situation and prompts for how to play. Unfortunately, this identity is superficial and many self-designated story games are imitations, and not particularly good ones. In practice, the term has merely become a marketing device.

"Indie" is a debased term, also a marketing device, and I did not choose it as a domain name or tagline for the Forge. I only use it as an abbreviation for *independent*, which at the Forge had a single definition: radical creator ownership. It has nothing to do with the concept, purposes, or design of any given game. Nor did the Forge or any other social entity own the term – it's a category of publishing we advocated, and that is all. Unsurprisingly, a lot of the people

participating at the Forge were influenced by one another, and many of the games show affinities or contrasts that reflect our dialogues – but not all. Being independent only means that individuals published their games as they saw fit, not that given content identified them as belonging to an in-group.

"Mainstream" is another degenerate term, both in substance and in the false dichotomy with "indie" that you imply. In 2004, a series of dialogues at the Forge clarified that mainstream content includes history, sex, biography/autobiography, horror, politics, self-help, and many other diverse things, whereas fringe content is highly focused on a particular gaming-derived version of fantasy adventure, and on pastiche of existing fan-favorite genres like anime. But in RPG culture, we claim the latter are mainstream and the former are fringe, which makes no sense at all. The independent games published from 2000 to the present are notably mainstream in their content, once you use the terms sensibly. This insight was originally presented regarding comics in the mid-1990s, by the owners of the excellent UK store Page 45, and it applies perfectly to RPGs.

Therefore none of your dichotomies are worth investigating. There are independently and non-independently published games. There are well-designed and badly-designed games. There are original and derivative games. All of these factual distinctions are (no pun intended) independent of one another, although I think that independently published games *tend* toward more innovation and better design.

What do you think of the RPGs market today?

I don't like it much, compared to a decade ago.

It is yet again polluted by identity purchasing. For a while, between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, the internet exploded some of the infrastructure that had led gamers to purchase things by brand alone. However, in the past eight years, a new and probably equally toxic infrastructure has arisen in its place, yet again favoring brand-identification, fashions of the moment, and nigh-hysterical imitation rather than trusting to one's own experiences and enjoyment as the primary guide for design and marketing.

For a demographic whose members often pride themselves on their independence of thought, gamers/geeks are incredibly prone to buying things in order to make themselves feel like they belong to a social clique within a matrix of other cliques, carefully ranked in status. If you're familiar with the Geek Hierarchy diagram, imagine that inside the "table-top role-playing" box, there's an equally detailed miniature hierarchy based on even more arcane and irrelevant details, and equally absurd in terms of actual status or meaning.

The effect on purchasing and play is awful: throwing money at things in order to buy identity in a nebulous social group characterized by fear of not belonging. It's the same old term *petit-bourgeois* on steroids. It engenders a genuine social tragedy: identity politics based on sunk cost*.* This outlook may be phrased: "I bought it; this is who I am; I'm the guy who buys *this.* I care about it because I bought it, and will never consider that it might not have been worth the price. Suggesting any such thing is not merely an attack on what I bought, it's an attack on me. And now, no matter what, I am going to get my identity into a privileged social position."

Social media have contributed to this problem, especially in comparison to the prior most common internet interaction in forums and moderated blogs. So many features seem designed exactly toward dysfunctional, purchased identy warfare:  the ephemeral, rapidly-disappearing posting; the practical impossibility of institutional memory; the like/dislike tagging of posts and individuals; the emphasis on inclusion and exclusion …

**Crowdfunding is not entirely a positive development either. I do love it for what it makes possible. However, it is arguably retrograde for role-playing publishing. First, the actual cost of publication is lower than it's ever been due to POD technology, so a sudden infusion of funds is not really all that necessary. It even promotes a return to "quality = expense" customer values, best paraphrased as "it can't be shit, it's very expensive." Second, it effectively forces a pre-order business model, which emphasizes deadlines and minimizes profit margins, putting a very tight squeeze on publishers (in fact, RPG fulfillment from Kickstarter funding is notoriously bad), even reversing the gain of gathering funds. Third, it ties into the identity-purchasing problem because it creates a two-tiered customer base between backers and newcomes.**

How do you see the future of RPGs, in substance and in form, and economically speaking? (new funding plans like crowdfunding, distribution, Internet, magazines, conventions, etc.)

**I'm convinced that economic infrastructure will always contain lurking traps. Any sort of distribution system generates economic chokepoints and conflicts of interest. The details of the historical moment and technology aren't really important except tactically. Strategically, game designers and publishers, who are best off being the same people anyway, will become marginal and exploited unless they are diligent in protecting their interests and helpful toward one another.**

**I'm also convinced that whatever changes in infrastructure occur, and even if some extremely robust system were to develop, two fundamental principles are inevitably in conflict in the user/purchaser base: identity politics vs. genuine creative ferment. There is no way to ensure integrity in the way people play, talk about play, or interact with one another in general. We can only work toward it, finding the only route to better design and enjoyment with ongoing, honest dialogue about actual play.**