

*This is an interview from February 2016, assigned as part of a college course. The student picked me.*

In your games, you seem to touch on a wide variety of areas, like politics and religion. How do you believe that your viewpoint is seen throughout your game designs?

**I'll have to turn that question around on you. I can't answer anything about what others see, think, or feel; to find that out, you have to ask them. I can tell you about what I've tried to convey.**

**With the two Story Now books, *Spione* and *Shahida*, I've been very explicit about my own views, which are easily described as anti-U.S. exceptionalism. The first humanizes the stereotypical "enemy spy," and the second humanizes the stereotypical "Arab terrorist." The third such project, *Amerikkka*, does the same for the stereotypical "militant" in the United States. The four odd little "religion games" – or almost-games, just prototypes – are more vague in their texts, but the webpage which provides them includes explicit text about my outlook. Briefly, I think religion has very little to do with faith, metaphysics, or belief, and each little prototype (for reference: *Estimated Prophet*, *Shine a Light*, *Cathedral*, and *Daemon Lover*) examines a different aspect of the religious human experience as I see it.**

**My other, more traditional games are also politically and philosophically motivated. *Sorcerer* is deliberately subversive, not only of standard forms of role-playing, but of the very idea that power makes your character a hero. *Trollbabe* is a celebration of the feminism in which I grew up, which is very different from what the term may mean today, and also of a certain type and style of fantasy fiction which, similarly, is not found today or even remembered. *Circle of Hands* directly challenges modern views of social activism which I find to be complacent, overly conciliatory, and self-defeating. You can find other pushbacks or ideological content in all my work; usually, I explicitly say what it is in the earliest or latest part of the texts.**

What steered you in the direction of a tabletop Role Playing game design rather than video games, card games, etc.?

**I don't think I ever experienced that as a choice. Partly it's generational. As a younger person, and this may be hard to imagine, there were no games based on imaginative fiction, except for the very early role-playing games. All the card and board games I grew up with were traditional, like Hearts and Poker and Parcheesi. Even to this day I have no personal history with electronic, visual, or digital gaming of any kind; I don't even know what the different terms like Xbox or Sega mean. Therefore role-playing games were the single venue available for social, interactive enjoyment of fantasy and science fiction material.**

**Also, my design interest lies in the experience of creating fiction (for any number of social-creative purposes), and that means something very different from experiencing – reading, viewing – someone else's fiction. The other media you mention, and others like them, depend very much on providing or referencing existing fiction rather than creating it.**

I want to talk a bit about Doctor Xaos, your upcoming project. What will set this apart from the other Role Playing fantasy/superhero game?

**The main thing is that it's not a role-playing game at all. I've brought some easy bits of role-playing, especially making up characters and stating actions, into a more traditional card-based**

social game. It may be too much of a hybrid: you don't really play cards against one another as thoroughly as in a "real" card game, but you also don't have the kind of leeway for character actions that you have in a role-playing game. It works but only if you hybridize the two things right.

I initially designed it as a fun experiment, but thought it was too specialized to develop and market, and then a couple of years ago, re-thought it and said, why not bring it a little further along. That led me to thinking about running a blog about comics, and ... well, here I am, discovering that the blogging and maybe even doing some comics of my own is looking like more fun.

That's a big lesson for you and other young people interested in game design and development, right there. The primary engine is always inspiration, and what you work on is what inspires you most, at the time. I've abandoned plenty of projects at an advanced phase simply because the feeling of excitement was no longer at the level it needed to be. I've also seen – or if you will, smelled – enough games that were forced into publication due to contractual obligations or promises, that should have been abandoned.

To be clear: I'm reconsidering how much effort I want to put into this project, and whether it might not be a better idea to focus on the comics work.

What game, above all other games in any genre or format, do you believe Doctor Xaos can be compared to?

Perhaps that's part of its problem: I'm trying to generate the fun of individual, improvised input you can find in some role-playing games with the organized and conclusive fun of a modern small counters-and-cards game like Bang, Oriente, or Coup. This turns out to be a lot of fun in playtesting, even with people who don't know me and encounter it right there, but it may also be impossible to market. I'm not sure I'm ready to break new ground AGAIN ...

Would this be a good game for those who are new to the genre (like me), or should they start with your first game and work their way up?

I don't understand your question. Those two things aren't alternatives. First, either it's a good game for people who don't know about superheroes and supervillains, or it isn't. Second, I haven't written my games in a developmental or sequential order; each can be encountered and played on its own, based on a person's interest and preferences.

I'll answer the first one as its own question. I wrote it very much from a comics reader's perspective, with the expectation that similarly-minded people would be contributing to play on a shared platform of references and standards. The earliest playtesting showed me that the game definitely needed that shared input, but strangely, later playtesting showed that a single non-comics person can be a big asset.

Still, it's not really a good idea to base what's supposed to be a fun, one-session, light game too tightly on player knowledge or genre faithfulness. I had stopped working on the design many years ago, and now, looking at it again, I'm definitely thinking that I should redesign the card-play to be a more strategic activity on its own, and to lighten the imaginative burden.

Have you considered bring this game, or any other game you have developed, into any other form of entertainment (video games, films, comics, etc)?

**Circumstances may eventually lead me to recant, but at present, and in my experience so far, I like to keep properties confined to their medium. I figure if I'd wanted to write fiction much like Sorcerer, for instance, I would have done it already, and I've found that I don't want to cross over characters between Doctor Xaos the game and my current comics writing. I also don't agree with the general pop culture hierarchy that role-playing games are "junior" or subordinate to comics, and comics are similarly subordinate to movies and TV, and that movies and TV are correspondingly subordinate to books. (some people reverse the latter two levels) Each medium strikes me very much as its own thing, with its own features, and a given creative idea seems to me to work best in one of them.**

**This view flies in the face of all modern pop culture and commercial assumptions, and I suppose if someone offered me a zillion dollars to license some game of mine into a movie, I'd find I could be bribed out of it. But as an individual creator and self-publisher, so far, that's how it seems to me.**

How do you plan to bring in a different type audience with Doctor Xaos (like youger/older or casual/hardcore)?

**I was hoping to cross over with people who like superhero comics, especially since I'm offering a spin on both content and creativity that other role-playing games don't, but during the past year, I've reconsidered that idea. Now, I'm thinking that it needs a play-process redesign, to make it a fun activity with its cards and turn structure, and with easier mechanisms for bringing into the fictional content. Now the target audience, in my mind, is shifting over to people who like the cards-and-counters games.**