

KIRA 1

I'm not sure how you feel about this stuff personally. I know you've written sexy bdsm-ish games before (i'm a sadmoasochist, among other things, so I love that shit) so I know you're familiar with those topics. I used to Forge it a bit back in the day, but I've never played your games! I like the ideas, but, I'm not an expert in your stuff, so I may be assuming a bit here.

You're probably familiar that rape fantasies are the number one fantasy people have, due to cultural and primal power play reasons. [redacted] (ovesharing!). I think they're ok to have, and fun to play with in a safe sane consensual way, although problematic in some ways. (Actually, that made me have another thought. Are you entering into setting fetish like boundaries with this game? Maybe that would be useful for safety stuff).

You know that rape is a real danger in the world, is terrifyingly prolific in college and high school culture right now, doesn't just have to do with women being victims, and many women and men playing your game have been raped (over half of my female and male friends have been sexually assaulted).

I agree with this comment from the thread: "That's my concern; not the rape itself, but that it's presented as something only directed at women. Men are sexually abused in a sense by being castrated, but the term "rape" is reserved for women."

I think if you're going to have rape in your game, it should apply to everyone, and that's 100% historically accurate.

I worry about it turning into a rape revenge tale, which is another trope, right. "oh noes, our womminz have been raped, we need to kill those fuckers." Meanwhile, what are the consequences for the woman? I actually just listened to a Dan Savage podcast where it said that women who are raped suffer more emotional attacks from the town afterwards, are outcast, need to move, their female friends turn on them because of fucked up patriarchy stuff and slut shaming, and then they commit suicide. Many men commit suicide after rape too, but its not as well documented because most men don't talk about rape. And the stats are ridiculous, because a majority of suspected rape isn't even reported.

I guess, if you're going to talk about the horror of rape, you could go there. But that's pretty real and terrifying.

I mean, definitely talk about lines and veils and safety and triggers and x-cards (duh, you know that).

But it sounds like you're getting at the themes of power in this game, right, and fucked up violent power. Rape is like, the ultimate power play. If you're going to go that route, I'd maybe detail that, and detail the real world harm it can do. Everyone's used to violence, but sexual violence is a real gray area in games. I'd be afraid to put that in people's hands without a heavy primer.

The other thing that made me cringe a bit with the gender was "women are exceptions". This is a tired trope that I wish would die. There's been women warriors throughout history, they're just not as well documented because of oppressive gender bullshit. I personally don't want to play an exception. I want to be respected and proficient and badass and terrifying. I don't want to fight extra hard in this setting because of my gender unless that's the specific point of the game, and everyone else has to do it to. Because I already do that in every other game, right? And every day in the real world right? That's not horrific for me, it's tedious and emotionally draining.

Another thing you could do is say "don't play this game with rape if that doesn't make you comfortable, for whatever reason."

ANYWAY.

I think your game looks pretty neat! Fantasy heartbreakers. Yojimbo (fuck yea). Ultraviolence and terror and power. Awesome. These are just ways I think you could tweak the female gender roles a bit, coming from a queer feminist critique standpoint.

Does that make sense? Questions/quibbles?

RON 1

As long as we're oversharing, I'm sort of boring in my personal sexual preferences aside from a bit of hedonism, but much more interesting politically. I was born in 1964 to older than average parents, and raised in a mix of the military and radical counterculture on the coast of California. I was literally born into direct political action concerning women's advocacy regarding childbirth. I saw the women's movement appear there with my own eyes and in the conduct and decisions of my family members. Issues of birth control, abortion, rape, discrimination, and many similar things - and above all the Vietnam War - were the ordinary language of my growing up. I tend not to speak much about this because still, most people encountered these issues as young adults and experienced them as revelations relative to their upbringing, whereas to me, this is ordinary and I live on a scary un-ordinary planet.

Another problem - and it is a problem for me - is that I think far too much of today's sexuality and gender discussion is trapped in a transitional psychology, the mind-set of "I was seeing it all wrong and now I'm trying to do it right." It means I have almost nothing in common with many people who think of themselves as very "forward" on these issues. I get along very, very well with older women activists, and not hardly well at all with most younger ones. I do not make much of this on-line, but I spend time working for a battered womens' shelter and I've helped organize Womens' Studies conferences in my academic career. Again, I do very well with people who've been through a lot and want to get something done about it, and not so well with people who are working through the issues a bit abstractly and with strong feelings of guilt.

But enough of that - it's to let you know a bit about why I might seem strange.

So about the text of the game, rape is definitely going to apply to everyone, just as you say. One of the posters at my forum was excessive in saying it was reserved for women based on one bitty paragraph, especially since in the later, more extensive text about it, the gender of those who suffer rape was not specified, for just that reason. But I do plan to bring it forward, much as you describe.

That does not mean I am writing to facilitate the rape of any characters, player or otherwise, necessarily to be right there in play. Exactly the opposite, in fact. I wrote extensively about why such things emerge in role-playing in my book *Sex & Sorcery*, and what I'm doing here is - as in that book for Sorcerer - showing how a whole group does not have to enter into the dysfunctions from which this appears.

So yes, safety in preparation is a good thing and will be part of the text. However, my view is not the following: "This game mentions rape and therefore it's highly likely to be portrayed abusively toward others at the table, so be careful ..." My view is rather the opposite that a harsh, fair, real presentation makes such things less likely, not more. That said, you will definitely see Lines and Veils in this game text, up to and including "You certainly have the option to downplay it to the point of absence in your particular stories" as a table issue.

I do not yet know exactly how much of a genuines primer is needed. Certainly enough to serve the needs of playing the game, to be made clearer through external playtesting. Whether such concrete items as trigger warnings and cards should be involved ... my thinking is that if the matter is handled very well textually, the game may not need these, but as with many things, I'll see what external playtesting suggests.

You touched on one of the horrors of rape being the social price paid afterwards: ostracism, accusations of complicity or worse, and the final toll of suicide. I will definitely be including this in the text. You also wrote, very accurately I think, that the game is harshest regarding the abuse of power, with rape being one of the forward-most examples. This is precisely the way I'd like to address it in the game text, relative to the setting. If I do it right, then a reader's response to to rape in the setting will be very much like his or her response to the descriptions of execution by torture: it is intended to be repellent based on purely accurate reportage.

If you check out the free playtest PDF, you will see that rape is specifically tagged as something to hate and fear in the setting, by most people at most times, for example.

Boy do I agree with you that rape-and-revenge is not the default model for female heroism.

I'm not sure if what you wrote about exceptionalism matches what I've written. The text distinguishes sharply between perceptions and reality, agreeing with you that women warriors are *not* exceptional, merely perceived

and justified as such by a gendered culture. I also think you might look again at the text about player-characters' unusual social situation, and how easy it is for female characters to overcome those perceptions merely by behaving pretty much as any player-character does.

If you're interested to see some of my writings about gender, sexuality, relationships, and similar stuff in role-playing, I recommend *Sex & Sorcery*, *Trollbabe*, *It Was a Mutual Decision*, and *S/Lay w/Me*. Again, though, my sensibilities come directly from 1970s California, a mind-set which has not been welcomed or adopted by many activists and academics today. These sensibilities are, however, honestly what they are, and I submit that they are still as radical as ever.

I'd like to continue the dialogue, it is very helpful for writing. I'd also not at all mind if you'd be a reader for the final-final manuscript some time in July.

KIRA 2

Cool!

I can understand how you'd be in a more 1970's mindset from your upbringing! I had a similar confusing radical upbringing, with lots of reversed gender roles and little oppression there. I've never worked at a women's shelter, but I have worked at a fetish/sex toy shop, which is a whole other realm about gender and sexual harassment, right.

I think if you just came out and said some of this stuff about your perspective that would go a long way. A lot of people have heard of your games but never read them. I've read them but never played them! I mean, the forge skewed pretty male, yea? A lot of women are just getting into story/indie games. (which is awesome to me, more ladies yay!) Is it repetitive? Maybe. But even a sentence about where you're coming from would probably placate a lot of your potential and current critics. If you care about doing that. Which... I dunno, tedious, right, I hate explaining myself over and over so I can see how you wouldn't want to.

I read the same paragraph that guy did, and searched "rape" in your playtest, and didn't see anything about it affecting both genders, or how to make it safe in your game. I did see that it's hated in the setting, but... its hated in most settings. Maybe just throw that in there for public consumption right now? Because it's clearly not what you intend. I think if you did that, it'd be easy to point to people to say, hey look, rape isn't gendered, and here's the safe stuff put in place while playing this game.

Also, I know this is a playtest, but lots of people totally don't care about the fact that it's a changeable draft and is going through more playtests. So there's that too.

You're making me want to re-read your games again. WIN.

I'm not sure if what you wrote about exceptionalism matches what I've
> written. The text distinguishes sharply between perceptions and reality,
> agreeing with you that women warriors are *not* exceptional, merely
> perceived and justified as such by a gendered culture. I also think you
> might look again at the text about player-characters' unusual social
> situation, and how easy it is for female characters to overcome those
> perceptions merely by behaving pretty much as any player-character does.
>

So, as a result of this, will women player characters have to fight against a gendered, sexist system in any way? That's my concern.

I'm glad I'm helping! I'd love to give it a final read in July.

Also, I haven't played it, right, and play vs game text is always totally different. I think this is a lot of perception based on an unfinished text. Shifting that perception seems pretty easy with an addition of literally a sentence or two more.

You know all this though!

RON 2

Thanks for the kind words, again. I'm going to take the liberty of responding a bit out of order.

> I think if you just came out and said some of this stuff about your
> perspective that would go a long way.

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> probably placate a lot of your potential and current critics. If you care
> about doing that. Which... I dunno, tedious, right, I hate explaining
> myself over and over so I can see how you wouldn't want to.

We're in agreement there. It's more than just the tediousness though. One thing I learned from queer and feminist activists and from plain people whose very existence was activism was, never apologize for being yourself. And in many of these dialogues, explanation inevitably serves as apology and begging for inclusion. I don't do that.

As I see it, anyone who reaches out even a little gets a strong handclasp back. I even send up a signal that this is possible. But I use that reaching-out as a bar - someone who doesn't do it, isn't going to get a plea or a self-abasement to get them to. Fear isn't overcome by the other person disempowering themselves; I've found out the very hard way that doing this only prompts fearful bullying instead.

> ... I mean,
> the forge skewed pretty male, yea? A lot of women are just getting into
> story/indie games. (which is awesome to me, more ladies yay!) ...

I submit that the Forge, 2002-2003, was the single internet venue for female voices in gaming, and successfully so. A lot of that was wrapped around my book *Sex & Sorcery* (2003), which is acknowledged by people like Meg Baker and Emily Care Boss as the opened door to women's independent game design and publishing. Not that I did it magnanimously to all those po' li'l womens out there - no, the powerful female participation at the Forge and my thoughts on these matters generated a synergy. There's a reason that book features a lot more voices than my own. Games like *Breaking the Ice* and *Kagematsu* - neither of which I could have written - are direct and very obvious spawn of *Sex & Sorcery*.

Julia Ellingboe is a backer of Circle of Hands. I don't think that is nothing.

> I read the same paragraph that guy did, and searched "rape" in your
> playtest, and didn't see anything about it affecting both genders, or how
> to make it safe in your game. I did see that it's hated in the setting,
> but... its hated in most settings. Maybe just throw that in there for
> public consumption right now? Because it's clearly not what you intend. I
> think if you did that, it'd be easy to point to people to say, hey look,
> rape isn't gendered, and here's the safe stuff put in place while playing
> this game.

Sure! This whole dialogue is about changing the document. I would have finished that today - and added the warning to the KS page that I promised someone else earlier today - if the day hadn't turned into Parenting Never Stops by the mid-afternoon.

Which leads us to ...

> Also, I know this is a playtest, but lots of people totally don't care
> about the fact that it's a changeable draft and is going through more

> playtests. So there's that too.

I hope you can see that this is a trigger for me. If someone doesn't care about exactly that, then he or she doesn't care anything about the reality of the situation. People who don't care about the reality of situations are right in the same zone as Creationists and fascists. No matter what else they are or claim they stand for. I don't respond to such people no matter what they call me. You may rely on the fact that I have been called very, very bad things in my life. I've even been queerbashed, cis straight white male or not. I know what being targeted by hate and prejudice is, and the first step is someone who doesn't care about facts.

Whew. My apologies - none of that intensity was directed toward you. I know that's not where you're coming from. The rational response is that if someone has this view, then there's nothing at all I can do to reach them. Even if I were to abase myself and do anything and everything they ask just so they stop yelling at me, the only response I'd get would be a different sort of abuse.

>> (my text on exceptionalism)

- > So, as a result of this, will women player characters have to fight
- > against
- > a gendered, sexist system in any way? That's my concern.

The point is that female player-characters have won that fight already. They may encounter confusion or prejudice on first encounters, but mainly as what I call "color" to the interaction, not as a dice-worthy conflict or crisis of play.

I am a little reluctant to say, "yes, sure" totally easily, which would imply that a low-tech, Iron Age setting was entirely free of gender bias and genuine sexism. I find that hard even to imagine and am pretty sure that demanding such a setting isn't what you meant. You specified women player characters, so the answer for them is no, this is not a default or ongoing crisis for them as characters.

- > ... I think this is a lot of perception based on an unfinished
- > text.
- > Shifting that perception seems pretty easy with an addition of literally a
- > sentence or two more.

Yup! Look for changes in the next couple of days.

KIRA 3

I mean, yea good point about the forge being a venue for women to create and publish our own games. Even though the majority seemed male to me, I know that's generally the case with online gaming forums, and a lot of good came from it for sure. Not attacking the forge or anything, I think it was great.

Explanation as apology. Yes definitely. Although, sometimes I have found that people are just ignorant, right, and need educating. Not my job to do it, but I've found some success from queerness and feminism when something is put simply and succinctly, or I take a minute to talk to someone like a person, or even just speak out. I go back and forth on this actually, I don't ever want to seem like I'm apologizing, but I do want to gain allies and visibility. Difficult!

Really sorry you've been bashed like that before. I feel your frustration, and sometimes I think, with this, not everyone has the best intentions, despite what we wish. You can't make everyone happy, make what matters to you, right? And make it as good as you can.

I guess if the sexism isn't an ongoing crisis for the women, slightly better (for me, and feminist lady gamers)! I'd argue though, you have a fantasy setting, not a historical setting, so anything goes as far as what you want to do with the gender. If there's magic, it's not historical.

Thanks for the good conversation! I don't need acknowledgement, I don't feel like I've done any work (haven't really playtested it). Just reached out to you based on conversations and concerns. I really appreciate your openness as a creator, it's hard to put yourself out there to strangers with things you've spent a lot of time and energy on. Cool to see that the conversation helped in any way, and I think your changes are awesome.

RON 4

Thanks Kira! I was thinking after my last post that I should follow up to acknowledge that certainly there were more men posting at the Forge than women, because without mentioning it I might seem like I was trying to cover that up.

Anyway, great conversation, and many thanks.