

## COMMENTS AT THE PATREON FOR Q&A 5

SEAN

I cannot offer any insight into the workings of those games. But I do think there are some good games out there that tackle some of the idioms of science fiction, or, like Skyrealms of Jorune, embrace science fantasy and its weirdness. When I think SF rpgs I don't think about Trek or Star Wars as representing that niche very well. Despite the fact that you can create explorable situations with verifiably SF idioms. I will stop here because I am going to ramble incoherently. I appreciate James' question though as well as the difficulty in answering it.

- Ron: Hi Sean, I have a long list of science fiction games which qualify as tackling the idiom, and I've played a lot of them. What I don't have is a big-picture of cultural and economic understanding that's comparable to what I've learned about fantasy, role-playing, and fantasy role-playing. Part of the reason is that science fiction as a cultural, economic category already existed, or rather, a much broader literature was codified and limited into pieces, before it was adopted into role-playing. Whereas fantasy - again, in terms of a highly parsed category for commerce - was codified and limited in this way partly through interacting with role-playing. My tentative take is that science fiction role-playing isn't a thing of its own but rather, most of the titles reflect that particular person's science fiction fandom interfaced with their sense of what role-playing is \*supposed to be like\* - i.e., an act of conversion, rather than expression. That doesn't mean the games are necessarily bad, and they certainly include plenty of good ideas (either source inspiration or game authors) but until recently they are typically very limited in concepts of play, racing to the middle in most of their design/purpose. I hope this doesn't pick a fight, but once past the delight of hoping someone brought Vance or Dickson SF to role-playing, Skyrealms of Jorune is insanely boring. I've written a lot about the exceptions, and if you look at the games I've played in the past five years, the proportion of science fiction has jumped up, on purpose. I know what you mean about the incoherent rambling. I've stopped myself a lot in the past whenever I've said, "let's think a little about science fiction in role-playing." The first step seems to be how to keep ourselves from grabbing anything and everything, which inevitably spins into blithering about Firefly, and to focus on identifiable topics and questions.

JESSE

That Spione explanation was perfect and exactly what I was looking for. I was indeed talking about the "smash cut" because in the few times I've played it I've occasionally had a player who thinks they're Alfred Hitchcock and is building mystery and suspense by occasionally cutting away to some other activity before something is "revealed". Like, Player A will say "Joe is in his apartment when the phone rings. He stares at it intently letting it ring a few times." And then Hitchcock player will say "We cut to Joe meeting his girlfriend at nearby cafe. He is deeply troubled and insisting she must flee Berlin immediately." The point being that we don't know who called Joe or what was said or if Joe even answered the phone but whatever happened it so agitated him he feels the need to tell his girlfriend she needs to leave. Presumably this done to leave what is so agitating Joe open for a later "reveal". The fact that you shouldn't do this makes total sense. Indeed, players who do this I can often feel a mounting sense frustration that they can't assume total authority over SOME aspect of the game. Deep down they really want to be the person who introduces a bunch of "mysterious" content and then play the "AH HA" moment where they reveal what it was all about. They insist on trying anyway despite the game being built to thwart that. ... This somewhat relates to a thought I had while I was listening to your comments on Nine Worlds. It occurs to me that why some people equate "narration authority" not only with "say anything" but specifically backstory authority is because in a lot of play culture, discovery of the

backstory is the primary activity. Something bad went down and your characters exist only to discover what it was and then momentarily get ahead of it to stop the Big Bad from doing the next or worse bad thing. If that's your primary context of play where "outcome" EQUATES to "I learn a piece of the backstory." Then it's rather natural that the first time you encounter "narration authority" you're going to jump to, "Oh, so I get to say what the letter in the secret compartment says." or "Oh, I get to make up what the NPC says happened Friday night." Because from that frame of reference that's what "success" typically gets you.

- Ron: I'm really glad this exchange about Spione worked! You know how much I care about the game. I think you are exactly correct about the narration/backstory issue ... and I think it's even bigger than what you describe. As I see it, in a lot of play-culture, "to say" is completely one person's job. Everyone else can contribute only in the sense of filling in or providing cued content for that person. If it "happens," then it's either because that person filtered it (from someone else) or they produced it entirely - in either case, only they officially said it. If you're not that person, you really only have to listen to and to deal with them, for the filtered and delivered content. Backstory is clearly a big piece of this, especially in any context when the reveal of "what's going on" is expected or planned to be the climax of the experience. From the perspective of that culture, the "say" person is obviously also going to be the author and presenter of the backstory content. Now - don't get me wrong - I am perfectly fine with classical GM backstory authority, and several of my games rely on it. What I'm talking about it is confounding it with \*any and all\* authority in this specific overseer, story-teller, performing-for-you way. This is why I distinguish very sharply between "narrate," which I use only as a subset or extension of outcomes, and "talking," by which I mean any informal or formal contribution toward the experience of play. Not all talking is the exercise of authorities, and only one of the four authorities is narration (in this sense).

#### GORDON

Recently, I was trying to make sense of some past play experiences that were deeply embedded in discovery of the (as you say, Ron, GM/overseer/etc. controlled) backstory, but that I still consider fun/positive play. And I thought maybe ... maybe the key is just to be sure (using your words, Jesse) that discovery of the backstory is NOT the primary activity. Maybe it can be just about as big of AN activity in play as you want, just NOT the whole point. Not that big of an insight, given decades of plugging away at this stuff - maybe just another way to say things that have been said plenty before. But for me, the realization that past potentially-doomed play avoided that doom because we sorta-stumbled (or cleverly used some particular system-tool, whatever) into that solution ... opens up a way to explain success/enjoyment of that play with new insight. It's not just "I/we got lucky", it's "I/we got lucky BECAUSE". And that's cool!

- Ron: I love play with a very strong component of discovering backstory, especially when the discoveries contradict or provide immense perspective on the fictional present. Asymmetric information (e.g., the GM knows, the players don't, among any other construction one might suggest) is a wonderful thing. I don't think this concept is inherently flawed, thus needs some compensating feature, or poses an intrinsic difficulty in execution that has to be solved. I say this because of your phrasing "... that I still consider fun/positive play," as if there were a claim that it was not or couldn't be or needed something in order to be. If there is such a claim out there, I'm certainly not the person making it. The only thing I see Jesse and I criticizing is violations of a given organization for authorities, in this case backstory specifically: the mistake that having narration authority about a local,now- in-play resolved outcome is the same thing as having

backstory authority about the larger situation. That would be a mistake for any arrangement of authorities, classic GM/players or any other. I agree with your main point for sure. My specific take on it is that outcomes in the present-day fiction are still in question, and the revealed backstory information sheds light on the ones we've seen and might change the decision-making for the ones still to come. In that case, the backstory information is fueling things in action right now, rather than being the primary or sole point.

- Lorenzo: I love discovering backstory as a player. I think that when done right, with all the authorities in the right places and used correctly, it doesn't run any risk of becoming performance from whoever holds the backstory authority, because I'm there for it and my own authorities allow me to participate in it. I would go as far as saying that reading or watching a good mystery movie or noir isn't a precisely passive activity, but that may be digressing. In our Undiscovered game, discovering the backstory was definitely an highlight of the game for me. And I think it's a good example of game that highlights how participative the process can be - looking back, it really had a lot going on, a ghost, politics, colonialism, racial issues that all hanged on some level on asymmetrical distribution of information between players. And we didn't discover *\*all\** of it, but every moment that shedded some clarity about what was happening and what had happened was deeply enjoyable to me. Added bonus: "finding out what has/is happening" while other players are playing (because our characters are separated) is a big part of how we participate. Sam finding out things by going somewhere several dozens of miles away from where my character was requires or to the very least allows my participation. But the other very important element that this game can provide over the idea that unless I get to (mis)use my narration authority to participate in the backstory I'm being passive (a very prevalent idea, in my experience) is the relevance of those informations to the characters. It's not just "finding out the thing", but what the thing means for me. How does he feel about it? What does he want to do about it? Is this emotionally relevant for me? Can I use this? Does it change what I do next? I'm gonna say something that I know could be controversial or problematic (especially because I know I won't be able to convey it correctly): the obsession with talking and being an *\*active\** participant in this medium can be detrimental to its enjoyment. Of course it's a big element, but I'm embracing more and more the idea of a "medium of listening" (that includes the idea that someone needs to be talking, for others to be able to listen) and I think we collectively need to re-evaluate the idea of listening to others play or talk as an activity, a deeply enjoyable one and one that isn't necessarily passive at all.
- Ron: I think your final paragraph is extremely sensible.
- Gordon: Setting aside that the whole (SO insightful and useful) "organization of authorities" understanding seems in some small way "off" to me, I see and agree fully with the specific "violations of a given organization" issues you point out here. They're clear and important in my estimation. And obviously you have been always vocal about the issues of well, railroading, with no real play happening and some singular person with THE story just revealing/modifying backstory (and creating "front"story, etc.) as they see fit, via a number of more or less convoluted structures, in order to get that story. The thing I *\*think\** I'm seeing right here is just how really, REALLY big a singular control of (pre-existing?) backstory can be and yet NOT cross into that. IF, that is, there's something that's an actual shared created-in-play story present as well. Some of my deeply-entrenched in published-module story play, I say now, was enjoyable because no matter how close the GM kept us to the module-story, our play was in some ways about other things. That's the sense in which I meant something might be needed in order for it to be fun/positive. But maybe I'm combining too many ways that "backstory" can be used in my thoughts, and you were really confining it more specifically.

JON

A great series of questions and answers! Thank you for that answer to my question: I was nodding along to most of it and had a genuine "aha" moment at the end. I definitely would be interested in further dialog with specific texts in hand.

- Ron: A related and equally crucial point is that, for a given game (fiction, procedures, et cetera, everything) to "support" or "encourage" a given purpose, then it absolutely cannot provide a guaranteed fulfillment of that purpose. This is the point which blew clean past a lot of people exactly 20 years ago. The last thing you want if you are inclined toward Story Now is some set of procedures which guarantee that you receive a fun! story! no matter what you do. Can a basketball, a court, and a nice clearly-explanatory rulebook ensure that you will have a fine time playing basketball? No. Obviously the better they are, the more they will serve that purpose, but "provide," "give," and "guarantee" are fatal concepts to the purpose. I really don't know why it was so hard for people to see that.
- Gordon: Ron, that seems to me the clear corollary from understanding that "system matters" is NOT "system (and CERTAINLY not rules text) dictates". But then again, there's no guarantee that in the midst of any particular discussion I'll remember it. Hell, I find myself reacting to you using "receive" in "receive fun! story!", and obviously I know full well you don't mean to endorse what I'm bristling at. There's a LOT in this Q&A that's got me thinking, and I'll just have to figure out what thoughts might be worth typing and posting...
- Ron: (to Gordon) As I see it, the "system doesn't dictate" concept and the issue of "a text is just a text" are both good concepts, and they're related or adjacent to the thing I'm driving at, but not quite the same. A corollary, just as you say. The thing I'm driving at is whether the game (system, writing, method of instruction, anything) \*provides\* the purpose, i.e., satisfies its successful accomplishment if you just do what it says. Fun in a box, all you have to do is open the box. In role-playing, this might also include "purpose in a box," in the sense that if you just do what it says, that purpose will flap out of the box and lodge into people's heads, and, not only that, \*then\* will provide/achieve the successful purpose. I don't understand the bristling at all - even about what, or why, or why you mention it - but I'm probably better off staying that way.
- Jon: "The last thing you want if you are inclined toward Story Now is some set of procedures which guarantee that you receive a fun! story! no matter what you do." This is something I sensed in a grasping, inchoate manner 10+ years ago, but wasn't able to put into words or explain until I started participating at Adept Play. I knew I was experiencing diminishing returns when playing many self-described "story games" despite them all seemingly reliably delivering on their promise --- every time out -- but I wasn't able to connect that seeming reliability with why they weren't as satisfying as my experiences with games that hadn't been as reliable. (And I'm realizing what a terrible word/concept "reliable" is in this context as I type this...)
- Ron: I agree! Reliably what? A good set of instruments is reliable for practitioners' use, not reliable in terms of doing the thing \*for\* the practitioners. I can fully understand any resentment I've drawn upon myself from those who arrived at functioning, purposeful play using the rules they'd committed to long ago - through raw determination, enthusiasm, original creativity, and probably faith. To them, a lot of what I've written sounds like repudiation or dismissal of "their favorite game" which they know damn well worked ... but of course, they associate this functionality with the actual original text and not with their usage and, frankly, revision of it. And from that point of view it's all too easy to think, mistakenly, that I was in fact seeking clockwork wind-up guaranteed-X toy design (as per Gordon's point, "interpreting "system does matter" as "system does it for you"), and to be rightfully revolted by that thought.

- Gordon: Ron - Fully ignorable, but "receive" made me think something about Story Now as passive reception of story, which ISN'T how you used it there and OF COURSE isn't something you'd ever say and STILL I reacted - aren't I/human brains crazy?

## LOVE

Thank you for the answers regarding Holmes D&D, they make much sense! Some of my questions and confusions are probably rooted in the fact that I grew up with skill lists and characteristic rolls on a resistance table (Drakar och Demoner, the 1985 and 1987 editions). I have no real gaming experience of anything that could be called "dungeon crawl" using D&D, and have only minimal play experience with two versions of D&D. But there's a deeper root problem, and that's why I'm especially thankful of the reminder of how well constructed authorities is the only thing that can create bounce during play, i.e. we bounce each other during play. I should probably print that and put it on my wall, because I was staring myself blind on the dice mechanics, trying to visualize play and how to adjudicate resolution almost only from them. I'm sure I fall into that trap because of my experiences of murky non-play. Holmes D&D, I realize, is pretty clear about its authorities throughout many parts of the text (and it isn't compromised by hobby-created memes like "the gm controls the story"). So I can see that it can be more fruitful to NOT have procedures with instruments of randomization for many (for me expected) things in Holmes D&D, when "hard" mechanics is present in other well chosen parts of the system.

- Ron: For a couple of years, I've been thinking about how to talk about situational authority without two unhelpful, untrue presumptions getting in the way. The first one is the presumption of teleology: "where is this going," therefore saying things which direct, instruct, or determine an upcoming \*outcome.\* The second is the presumption of determinism: "well, the dice say this is supposed to happen, it's not me," therefore removing one's own input - or perhaps, denying it - from all the imagined content at this moment. Whereas in the construction that I'm trying to get across in the courses, I'm stating that the authorities are always present and always intersecting (inside them and across them, in some manner specific to that system), and that such things as dice are subroutines and modifiers. So if you roll on the wandering monster table, the result is only a component of your undeniable and unavoidable creative responsibility to say how, when, and in what manner these wandering monsters arrive in play. It seems to me that Holmes as a person was very good at this, and so were a lot of the people involved in early role-playing and the various titles' design. Unfortunately, the articulation of how to play, and its codification first in supplements and later in core books, arose instead from those two false presumptions.