

Q&A 17 comments summary

SEAN: RE: GNS / Pablo's Question. As a useless aside, very recently I watched a video where the presenter used Simulationist unironically. I smiled because I could have been that guy not too long ago. But thinking back to those days I feel like there never was a good understanding between play and design with GNS. I am not going to rehash any of it except to say, the application of theory was never consistent and I think sometimes largely unintentional. People put in the work or didn't and the results were what they were, but there was never enough playing out of ideas, because I do not think most people came to any real conclusions about the theory or hypothesis or whatever label we put on it. Just the idea that a group existed where one could talk intelligently about game design seemed enough of a win. Whether the results were coherent seemed like less of a goal to the general populace of those involved.

- **Me:** My view is harsher. I think only some people grasped even the basic concept I was presenting, for the reasons I presented in the video. Those who did were already in little need of assistance, and they tended to absorb the essays easily and without argument (instead, with useful discourse, often private). For these, I submit that your judgment is incorrect: application was already "there" and found more focus and enthusiasm among them. For them, as I'd naively expected would be common, I wasn't saying anything weird or revolutionary, merely obvious, or helpful in the sense of "oh, this is what we're doing, and finally someone is saying it, or trying to with at least a good start." By contrast, others invented several extraordinarily bad attempts at application and trumpeted them loudly both on the site and elsewhere, attaching my name and the site's reputation to them, no matter how much I tried to counter it (and in fact, I was not internet-savvy enough to understand that it was happening). One of them was this hyper-engineering I described in the video, and there were others, such as the hyper-ventilating "emotions emotions" encounter group or personal therapy trend. Fortunately, even in these, I think some good games can be found among the mess - but the more general understanding and playfulness is gone. I won't even bother describing the incompetent college-crowd attempts to "revolutionize the revolutionary" and to become (their term!) "the rock stars," or the similar graduate-student level blithering at the site, including its obsessions with classroom status. When you stopped participating, these effects were approaching their crest, and soon afterwards I stomped on them hard, in stages, most fully around 2008. I think the Forge was a lot quieter and also more productive after that, but unfortunately, what it "was" as culturally perceived (but actually wasn't) had been established and "known" in casual terms, everywhere. I'm still living with it - "You are nothing like I expected," "I didn't expect you to say that," et cetera, is the usual junkyard I have to go through before anyone starts listening to anything.

SEAN: RE: Queer Fantasy / JC's Question. A couple thoughts I had. I know its not fantasy and Le Guin even admits it has issues, but The Left Hand of Darkness is one I recommend to people. I feel its excellent, but that could just be my taste. One that is fantasy, though the author is problematic, are the Lythande shorts. I am less a fan of McIntyre's efforts, but MZB did create a compelling character. And Lythande's reputation is that of a lecherous man.

- **Me:** I figured The Left Hand of Darkness has been "done and done again," in terms of people's understanding and processing - and, questions of good-or-bad as a story aside, I don't think it's particularly queer in any meaningful sense of the term. Lythande is very discussable! I try not to think about Thieves' World and its derivatives these days, as I concluded, soon (maybe 1983) that the whole thing was borked and un-fun despite Asprin's efforts. Lythande, specifically, seems to me to have taken on an important issue (trans and/or passing), but also to have been a very sex-negative, unpleasant take, with none of the

humanity I find suffusing every story by Salmonson, for example. It didn't even generate sympathy or understanding for the topic, treating the whole thing as kind of a nasty joke. If all sex is rotten in both act and social concept, then who cares if some gender-identification is switched around? I bought the collection and I recall disliking it thoroughly on that basis, although today I can't recall any of the plots.

JESSE: It's interesting that you point to The Society in Vaesen as being a trouble spot. It's certainly an element that seems to exist across a ton of occult mystery games. Chill had SAVE and League of Seekers has the name of the organization right in its title. Call of Cthulhu is almost notable for lacking this feature. It says the characters are occult investigators but doesn't prescribe how that expresses itself in the characters' lives or how that defines the PCs' relationships to each other. The primary purpose of these organizations seems to be two fold. First, to give the players basically a colleague working relationship with a common professional (for lack of a better word) agenda and to allow the game to progress as a series of episodes rather than a single character drama that simply resolves. Honestly, I point to 80s & 90s TV as the obvious model. In particular shows like Poltergeist: The Legacy and The X-Files. Those histories and tensions that exist between the characters exist as background context for the episodic adventures. They flare up from time to time but always simmer down in the face of danger and the needs of the greater good. I sometimes wonder if that's what these designers have in mind when they write these things. Performative tensions that make your play of any given scenario unique in that those flare ups are going to be specific to your table even when the overall shape of the adventure is meant to be fixed. (I may be repeating myself here from one of the Adept Play posts). But what I'm always interested in is this: Is the idea of the occult investigative society that heeds the call for help (or at least news of mysterious goings on) and arrives on the scene as outsiders to suss out evil (or at least threats) functional at all? Is it functional but simply boring to those of us who like more sophisticated setups or is it inherently a problem? Basically, what if you kept The Society in Vaesen? Kept the episodic, mystery-of-the-week structure. But let each episode be a fluid compelling situation that spoke to all those issues implied by the setting. More like Dogs In The Vineyard and its episodic Towns. It strikes me that gets you 90% of the way there.

- **Me:** I say, to hell with the Society. It's there only as a rescue from players who don't give a shit, so the GM can pretend they give a shit. There's a pervasive, long-standing issue all the way back to the hobby's origins, "why are we even here," which is a good question in some ways ... but it gets the problem backwards. We ARE here, the question is, how is this not stupid, and if it's stupid, THAT's the problem. Sometimes it's not stupid even when it's a raw coincidence and has no overriding justification, and I think Väsen's cultural context provides plenty of sufficient context for play. Briefly: you don't make stupidity smart by inventing an in-fiction box for them to sit in and which has no other purpose; and you don't need any in-fiction box for them to sit in, if the context is sufficient and not stupid. Employment or otherwise group-defining organizations can be great parts of a situation, e.g., the whole ISES thing in Khaotic is raw fun from start to finish. But when it's there only to put lipstick on the pig, which I submit is the case for SAVE, the Society, and their whole menagerie of fellow clones across these games, then I say, spray weedkiller on it because it's just a weed.
- **Sean:** I think the the Society might work better as an antagonist, like spirit-pursuing Pinkertons always showing up to make matters worse. Extolling, threatening, and bullying the players into joining. Everyone hates freelancers.

JESSE: I recently read Night's Master and Kill The Dead. I was frankly shocked at how sanitized Kill The Dead felt in comparison. Night's Master, as you say, has homosexual sex on, like, page 5 and passes through everything imaginable including dwarf on giant spider sex that I had to read a couple of times to make sure I understood I was really reading what I thought I was reading. Then Kill the

Dead has one tame mostly off screen sex scene and kind of mumbles at one point that one of the principle characters is gay. I couldn't believe I was reading two works by the same woman. In terms of contemporary queer fantasy fiction, I was recently persuaded to read Gideon The Ninth and its follow up Harrow The Ninth by Tamsyn Muir. The pitch of Lesbian Necromancers in Space was too good for me to pass up. While it is very much a product of an online generation (the fights and other dangers feel a little video game-y and there are direct references to internet memes and fanfic culture), I found the ending of Gideon the Ninth utterly shocking and downright subversive in terms of what you expect of a first book that's supposed to start an announced trilogy. The books ends, very definitively and precisely. The follow up book Harrow the Ninth is completely bonkers, very different from the first book, and is going to be a major thorn in anyone who attempts to adapt the work to film or television (a thing I thought was nearly a requirement from most fantasy publishers these days). The third book appears to have been broken into two books. So the trilogy is now a quadrilogy but I haven't read the third book yet. I hesitatingly recommend the first two. Hesitatingly because it's very obvious the author grew up in an internet savvy generation. But if you can look past some of the eyerolly bits, the underlying characters and narrative are rather compelling.

- Me: There do seem to have been at least two Taniths. I find the choked-up sexuality in The Birthgrave, and a few other similar works by her, to be extremely off-putting and outright painful. Whereas in other books, she is festive and delightful about it, even when acknowledging the variety of difficulties or issues which are included from time to time. E.g., Don't Bite the Sun, The Silver Metal Lover - yes, sex (pleasure, "freedom") isn't going to solve everything and trying to do so is a problem, but it's not itself bad, far from it.

PABLO: I confirm the excellence of the conversation!

JC: RE: Iron Age Comics. Alan Moore agrees that The Killing Joke is one of the worst things he ever wrote. I agree, and I also hate Frank Miller's Batman. You want grim Batman, the movie Mask of the Phantasm is far more mature than Miller. Yes! You're writing on Mask of Phantasm highlights so many things that make Mask a special and singular story. Batman is odd because I feel the Adam West Show (which I love, the second best Batman movie) and Animated Series are almost more defining for the character than the comic's themselves. RE: Queer Fiction/Pain Yes! I loved the talk about queer books and sex positive ones. I've checked out Tanith Lee's Night Master from the library and started reading it. What a wicked and nightmarish opening salvo. I'm digging it so far. I know Tanith Lee was an influence on Mark Smylie's novels (Artesia comics; The Barrow and Black Heart novels) and I can *really* see it a few chapters in. Well, I'm glad you talked about Jessica Amanda Salmonson anyway. I want to say that you hit on something meaningful to me - pain. Jessica Amanda Salmonson's work resonates strongly with me because it understands pain. I've found that some queer genre fiction I've encountered moves to eliminate or reduce the volume on queer pain. This is understandable, cis-gendered heterosexuals have plenty of pain-free stories, so it's only fair. For me, it can feel hollow to me. I need that pain, so I know the author understands some part of my experience, and isn't going to coddle me or exclude me. The pain doesn't have to be the central focus or even miserable, there is a *quality* even if the character is untroubled by their life of navigating a society that isn't built for you. I have some of the books you've mentioned - The Winged Assassin and the Thorn books because I heard about their Runequest connections. I started reading The Winged Assassin and set it down when I was moving. I need to finish that one. The opening of the book was a great illustration of what Spirit Combat would look and feel like. RE: Ye Olde Gay Sword & Sorcery Robert E Howard, Moorcock and Fritz Leiber have homo-erotic/romantic elements, probably unintentionally and maybe not (especially, in the case of Moorcock). REH's stories are very straight (Conan is so heterosexual) or disinterested (Kull) or weirdly subversive (Bran Mak Morn and The Worms of the Earth inverts a lot of cliches) but the way the author lingers on the masculine beefcake is consistent and sometimes kinda funny. Here is a line from The Shadow Kingdom that I

could imagine a Tex Avery cartoon character saying and then wolf whistling after. "So down the street they rode, and Kull gave no heed to any of the whispers that reached his hearing from the throngs that still swarmed the streets. "That is Kull, see! Valka! But what a king! And what a man! Look at his arms! His shoulders!" *Insert Wolf Whistle*

MURPHY: It would be interesting to see what your old remarks were about the lah draft, if you don't mind posting them again here? You mentioned in the video that you might do.

- Me: That's right, I did. Let's see if this works: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/almost-abandoned-16412189> It was tagged for all patrons so I think everyone can see it. *[It is still reserved for patrons - RE]*

ALAN BRADLEY: "Red Nails" portrays the lead female villain lusting after Valeria and has a passage that quite sensually compares the physiques of Conan and the male antagonist. One of the biographies (Blood and Thunder) suggests Howard was delving into what was available of what we would call the literature of BDSM at that time.

GREG: This is the clearest and most comprehensive explanation of what creative agenda means to me. Specially connecting the typology (step on up, story now) to the non trivial decision that this creative agenda becomes a life priority.