

WHAT WENT WRONG post-event chat

I've indicated which contributions are mine; if it's not designated, then it's someone else.

Golden age

I often hear that we are in a golden age of RPGs — in multiple venues. Experiencing this workshop with that rattling around my brain is interesting.

(Mostly it confirms my belief that we are not.)

- ... other than the 90s stranglehold I think whether we see good games/procedures is kind of orthogonal to the points of the presentation. But good texts don't equal good play. No text will save one who isn't interested in actually doing the activity but rather simply wants to be "in" the hobby.
- There are lots of well-produced resources that we would have envied years ago. I just found > 20 space combat rules that I could graft into some kind of game. But all these aids, and scenarios, and sets of minis or tokens need to be incorporated into a culture of play. (edited)

Fulfillment house

That was great! It put a lot of details together.

I was curious if the distributor who mis-handled *Sorcerer*, was the same as *The Riddle of Steel*? On RPG.net, years ago, Jake Norwood was talking about having trouble with distributors in a couple of post.

- [Me] Yes, it was. Technically a fulfillment house, not a distributor.

[Me] Closing point

I don't think I articulated a take-home point about the two slides with the cartoon disappointed person.

The modern celebration of role-playing's mainstream arrival represents a recovery from the *What Stuck On* slide, the first of the two.



That slide's hopes were based on the Blumes' desire to see the activity-based hobby become an industry-based consumer pool. So I do not particularly value or valorize this development; the prize is nothing to be excited about outside of an ideological mental haze. However, judgment aside, yes, the Hasbro purchase and, after some bobbling, effective marketing, D&D and to a junior extent "other role-playing" is no longer a subject of ridicule and social rejection. ... well, they call it cool, but really, in strict terminology, we should recognize it as fully, safely, and profitably square.

The second slide, *What Stuck In*, concerns the distortion and ultimately self-destruction of the activity itself, in the context not of the larger society, but of the tiny and rather rinky-dink pseudo-industry, specifically the centrality of distribution shaping the subculture.



As with the first slide, the ideal represented (the brilliant GM-led campaign) is not much of a prize, but seeking it and inevitably failing so badly was a deep trauma.

My point? That social recovery and acceptance or not, the role-playing activity returned to the larger society in a stunted, ineffective, and ultimately not enjoyable form, or specific lack of form. It also features its designated safe-rebel alternatives with their own labels, Indie and OSR, each of which has yielded the tiniest actual play and design in its respective bucket of the same 1990s toxic un-play, in hipster presentation. So I regard D&D 5th, Fate (and almost any self-designated story game), and OSRIC (and almost any self-designated OSR game) as all being that same thing: 1990s control over a canned and delivered narration. Not because of what *stuck on* from about 1980, but because of what *stuck in* by the mid-1990s.

That is exactly, then, what went wrong.

- During the 1990s part I noted this down, which really, REALLY, resonated with me: An idea that stuck was that "roleplaying is a fraught activity. Play is fragile and therefore it must be controlled."

Shame

After reflecting on my notes today, I am wondering about specifically the development of roleplaying subculture into the shame-based "What Stuck On" of the late 80s. As someone who was curious about roleplaying in the late 90s/early 2000s but in high school pathologically concerned with being one of the "popular" in-group (which I of course never achieved), roleplaying was still then a closeted, shameful thing--which I knew even on the outside, because although I was interested, I wouldn't touch it for fear of it tarnishing my chances of being cool. Are we talking specifically about that 80s "fearful culture", where edginess is OK but ultimately you're still only on the edge of the square, as in "being square"? The vanishing of countercultural forces, and thus the countercultural forces within roleplaying, creates a vacuum whereby roleplaying is sucked into the geek niche (defanged like fantasy fiction), simultaneously marginalized as not 80s macho? And all of this happening as the alleged industry is imploding, contributing to the feeling that we roleplayers are not doing a real, legitimate thing, but are the awkward fetishists? This shame about the activity, especially since it *doesn't* seem to have been there from the start, is a very important cultural and sub-cultural development to tease out, I think. I welcome comments from anyone who was there at the time. I'm especially interested to hear from

those in Europe or elsewhere at the time, whether this shame about the activity was in effect in your experience.

- [Me] The answer to every question mark in your second paragraph is yes, as I see it, even emphatically yes. I'll modify one bit of your first question, concerning edginess. That didn't really come into the fore as cool until the 1990s, especially as white people imbibed hip-hop, as Hong Kong cinema crossed over, and as 1950s prudery aged out of power. Cool in the 1980s was more about showcasing ready cash, beating down anti-social "drug" criminals, and running white-collar scams (e.g., Wall Street tries to critique exactly these things and ends up becoming their mascot; The Dark Knight Returns tries to critique exactly these things and becomes a weird libertarian-Right screed). This is more of an orienting content point and doesn't disagree with your portrait at all.
- [original commenter] That picture of edginess rings true to me. Me and my white friends in the mid-late 90s were buying rap albums like maniacs, but you didn't touch something unless it had the parental advisory sticker. Black = bad, swears = bad, bad = cool.

DriveThru

Maybe a naive question, but what is the issue with DriveThruRPG? That it's essentially the same distributor role as in the '90s? I get that they take a cut, but I can also see they provide hosting for files, discovery by being a destination, POD fulfillment, SEO and marketing. I dunno, I rely on it quite a bit. Is what they provide not worth the cut they take? And does itch.io fall in the same bucket?

- [Me] DriveThru is effectively parasitic. The same service can be provided without the rake-off. I buy things there too, rarely, but I hate knowing that I'm paying off a highwayman who's set up a cultural monopoly. I am very unsympathetic to the notion that convenience is any sort of justification, especially since it assumes neutrality. Central distribution is never neutral: things are included or excluded, things are favored or disfavored, and policies (like content boundaries) are ass-covering for the distributor and not beneficial either to provider or to customer. Let's consider as well the notion of DriveThru as a department store. It's not perceived as a place where one might find some of what exists; through habitual use, it defines what exists. Being there legitimizes a thing as "this kind of thing." They're assessed on the basis of "just released" or via association by algorithm with other things; there's no way to assess content.
- [Me continued] The psychology it fosters is insidious. Let's find some person who routinely buys things at DriveThru and (because it's related) pledges at Kickstarter. How do they react when I suggest, "Do without for six months. Play things you own or that someone near wants to play, nothing else." In my experience, they're shocked, or dismissive because that's obviously silly. They don't have a problem. They do this because they want to, and if they didn't, they'd stop. And besides, they'd miss things. They wouldn't be current. They won't be able to opine and "be there" for any tweet or Reddit or Facebook comment that mentions a thing, they'd be out of touch. Something amazing and top-of-the-world forever might come along, and they'd be a

beta person, they didn't pledge for it or get it smoking hot and new. Critically, no one will respect or understand your abstinence and you'll lose recognition. It's all social anxiety - not the thing at all, nothing to do with utilizing it for personal enjoyment - only what people think and say, how you fit in, where you stand, and how buying this thing right now will dull your anxiety about these things.

- [Me continued] Sometimes in a conversation like this, a person asks, "So what would you change," or, "Don't criticize without a viable alternative," or whatever. That's because they think I'm advocating for some kind of grand or visionary system. I'm not. This is just about understanding how things are. I'm more concerned with personal survival and enjoyment of what we do, and therefore what not to do so that my own brain doesn't get sucked in.
- [Original commenter] Thanks!
- I've had the experience of people dismissing me as uninformed because I wasn't following the latest in-game or kickstarter trend. "What?! How can you not know what Asswipes of the Buttguard is? Oh, you must be new."
- [Me] It's easy to spot when someone else does it. I have been surprised when someone points out when I say "Oh! But you *have* to see ..." Have to? Really, they have to? It's a heinous, bullying thing to say, and so is anything related as you're describing. I've tried to train myself out of it, but I bet I fail more than I realize.