

On Space Battles, Character Development, and Overwriting: Genre Interference in Textual Role-Playing

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It's not always easy when writers learn to switch between two different genres of writing. In this article, David Giovagnoli tells a literacy narrative in which he moves between creative writing and textual role-playing and then struggles when he tries to incorporate too much of one genre in the work of another.

In my first creative writing course in college, I wanted to write science fiction. It was a genre I was comfortable and familiar with; at that point I'd been writing it with my friends online for about five years. I was told “no” with some variation of the phrase “we don't teach science fiction at the university level,” by my professor, Adam Davis. It's possible that if I had been a little more persuasive, I could have done it—but he made a good case for branching out into other forms of writing. In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Davis describes how he didn't allow this sort of writing in one of his creative writing workshops: “I banned alt-worlding from my advanced creative-writing workshop. Told my students that their fiction had to take place in real environments with real people, facing problems that are actually likely to confront us (as opposed to stories involving international spy rings, penal colonies on Proxima Centauri, or aliens).” In other words, the genres Davis was asking his students to create were limited to the realm of the ‘literary.’

As a novice writer, I thought this attitude was snobbish, but I'm beginning to understand its necessity. As Davis states, this was purely a pragmatic decision

based on the realities of the world of writing: “They were invested entirely in invention—mere cleverness. That’s fine for a one-off, but the venues for that sort of thing are few. If the fundamentals aren’t in place as well—and they weren’t—that market dwindles to zilch.” Science fiction has a reputation for being driven by appeals to cool settings and effects and clever situations. This isn’t a reputation that’s entirely undeserved; fifty years of pulp science fiction stands as evidence. And yet, there are hundreds of thousands of completely realistic novels that few mainstream critics would ever call “literature” either, such as the romance novels you might find in the grocery store book aisle.

Less than two weeks later, Christopher Gavalier wrote a rebuttal to Davis’s piece:

A story’s setting, real or speculative, predicts nothing. Yet Davis bemoans the influence of pop culture, believing that all the alt-worlds infecting film, TV, and popular literature have mutated his students into lazy zombies instead of disciplined writers. If so, it’s got nothing to do with “alt-worlding”—all fiction writing is alt-worlding. There is no such thing as a work of fiction that takes place in the real world. Stories exist solely in words. That’s an unbelievably obvious fact.

Strong words, to be sure. What he says is true, though; the umbrella genre¹ of fiction is predicated on the fact that it’s, well, *fiction*. If the characters and plot aren’t real, why should the setting be? The problem with science fiction must be something else, then. As Gavalier puts it:

I define the term [literary fiction] as “character-driven.” Nonliterary fiction . . . is plot-driven and includes any story in which characters act according to the needs of the plot rather than from an artfully crafted illusion of psychologically complex motivation. Plot is still important—without it, the best you can hope for is a beautifully chiseled character study that lacks any page-turning momentum. But, I ask, is the plot serving the characters, or are the characters serving the plot?

Literary fiction and non-literary fiction are similar but competing activity systems.² The divide between them, however, is not at the realism of the setting but at the way in which the author balances characters with

¹An umbrella genre is a larger unit of categorization than a genre; a genre is to an umbrella genre as species is to genus in biology. Umbrella genres can stack within one another to expanding degrees of specificity. Fiction and Novel are both umbrella genres, while Romance Novel, Gothic Novel, Mystery Novel, and so on are genres.

²In this context, an activity system is the totality of the cultural, historical, social, physical, and cognitive processes that go into producing and consuming a text. For further information on activity theory, see Walker’s “Just CHATing” in Issue 1 of *The Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, available at www.isuwriting.com.

plot. As an example, Tom Clancy has written a best-selling series of modern military thrillers that are painstakingly accurate with their details. As Jack Ryan navigates through these novels, his actions are predetermined by the genre convention that the hero must win in the end—his decisions do not come from a realistic psyche, but rather the conceits and demands of the plot. In this case, there is a realistic setting without the “psychologically complex motivation” that Gavalier describes. Though it is a problem to throw science fiction and other “alt-worlding” out as non-literary, like Davis does, his fears were not unfounded when it came to my own writing as an undergraduate.

Since long before college, I had been writing with my friends online in what I considered a creative way. I assumed that I could write about anything I wanted to in a creative writing course, but I failed to take into account that the field of creative writing had its own genre expectations and demands beyond simply being “creative.” In a collegiate creative writing classroom, the knowledge I brought to the table from writing collaboratively about science fiction stories was not immediately applicable.

First Steps into Textual Role-playing

In about 2003, I was heavily into computer games. In particular, I had a fascination with a first-person shooter known as *Star Trek: Elite Force*, which allows players to take on the role of a member of the crew of the starship *Voyager*, with the mandate of eliminating aliens with high-powered weaponry. The multiplayer mode allowed players to compete with one another (mostly anonymously) from around the globe, in capture the flag mode, or simply in a battle royal-style death match. There was a chat interface, but I never used it much. I never really even noticed it until I stumbled onto a server with only a few other people one evening. This was my introduction to textual role-playing.

The most basic rule of the game is: shoot the enemies. Yet curiously, they weren’t shooting one another. Rather, their character avatars were crouched around a table in the room that represented the ship’s briefing room. In the chat window they were pretending to be actual Starfleet officers, preparing for a mission. I, of course, was to have no part of this and killed them all, before signing off in boredom.

It wasn’t until a few months later that I joined a server that was specifically labeled for role-playing purposes. Intrigued, I gave myself a rank and a position. First, Lieutenant, as that seemed respectable. Then, Commander, because that sounded more important. Within a few seconds of that, I was kicked (that is to say forcibly removed) from the server.

I Googled the name and found the organization’s website. There was a litany of rules (one of the most important being that you didn’t get to pick your own rank), which went far beyond the original game. Players weren’t supposed to shoot each other. Or run. Or be profane. Or have sex with one another. In-character statements and out-of-character statements were marked in certain ways in the chat stream (Figure 1). I was completely confused as I waded through this new activity system, before finally figuring out the purpose of the whole thing: the first-person shooter became a visualized chat room, where people could act out *Star Trek*-style plots with characters of their own invention.



Figure 1: A typical scene in a textual role-playing session, posted by Serris on *Trek BBS* at www.trekbbbs.com/showthread.php?t=259312. The text was added by the author to illustrate how conversations would scroll across the top of the screen during role-playing.

Neat! Fully versed in the rules, I signed back in and started playing. I caught onto the conventions of using technobabble³, pretending to do various tasks on the ship, and responding to the out-of-character silliness as we went through various missions. I’ve long since forgotten most of what actually happened, but after a few weeks, I was invited to join the organization. Over the next few years, I worked my way up from Cadet to Captain in the organization’s *Star Trek* division, and then Grand Moff and Jedi Master in the *Star Wars* division that was formed later, once *Star Wars: Jedi Academy* (a game based on the same software engine as *Elite Force*) was released.

It was a lot of fun. Even with some silly restrictions (“missions” were supposed to be, as much as possible, realistic simulations of the daily lives

³A phrase like “No, no, no, no, no, this sucker’s electrical, but I need a nuclear reaction to generate the 1.21 gigawatts of electricity I need” or “Divert power to the subspace intercooler” would be technobabble.

of Starfleet officers—an ironic nod to Davis’s position), I spent hours every day after school online playing with my new friends. In any given session, we would produce as much text as any hour-long television script, while acting out various scenarios. This text was created off-the-cuff and on the fly, and yet with a great deal of intricacy and attention to genre conventions.⁴

Unlike most texts, however, the trajectory⁵ was strictly internal—that is to say those who produced it were simultaneously consuming it. Because of the way that the servers for our games functioned, the stories we created were lost once everyone had logged out (or after about 500 lines of text had been sent back and forth). The system was designed to let players strategize about how they would win the game, not to let people *write*, after all.

While players did socialize and bond through this activity, for the most part characters didn’t grow or change; they served the plot of the day. When faced with an enemy dreadnought⁶, the sensible course of action would be to call for reinforcements, but that makes for a boring game, and so we’d attack it. It makes sense that a group of people in deep space for a long time might start to form romantic bonds, but we were teenagers and that was icky. So, our stories were limited to a certain kind of writing—that non-literary, plot-driven writing that Gavalier identified in his article.

The liminality of the texts we produced, that is to say, the fact that it disappeared after we created them, was something of a problem. After a while, we realized that someone should probably write down what happened in a more permanent way than the chat allowed for, and so we started to post session recaps and reviews, so we could discuss what happened and how it could go better and get feedback from our friends who weren’t in that session. Various competing criteria (excitement vs. believability, pacing vs. time spent playing, attention to detail vs. avoiding quibbling, etc.) were applied to these sessions, and the summaries began to get more and more complex as we wrote them longer and longer.

As our stories got more sophisticated, so did the technology we used to tell them. Modifications were developed for the software to let us represent what was going on in the story through visual and auditory actions by our avatars, ships could be represented more accurately in the game, and there were a

⁴Genre conventions are the characteristics that define a genre. For example, a Wikipedia article has citations, images, a “neutral” point of view, and links to other Wikipedia articles. Novels are fictional, typically have chapters, and are over 40,000 words long.

⁵As the term suggests, trajectory is the path a text takes from its initial conception and production to its reception by other people. This is both physical and metaphysical content—throwing this issue of the journal away and learning something from this article are both examples of trajectory.

⁶A kind of warship; picture a Super Star Destroyer.

wide variety of locales to choose from for adventures off the ship. The text we produced almost become secondary to the talents being displayed by the software designers and artists producing these environments for us to play in.

The Move From Virtual Reality to Pure Text

Eventually, we “discovered” that we could write about our characters’ exploits in the *Star Trek* universe without actually being on the server. This made it easier to play with people in radically different time zones and allowed us to really sit down and think about our contributions before posting them. Unlike before, when editing simply wasn’t possible due to the real-time nature of the process, we could focus on writing in a way that was a little more sophisticated. Of course, we “discovered” this sort of writing in parallel with a number of other existing groups on the internet, who variously labeled it PBEM (Play-By-Email) or PBF (Play-By-Forum) role-playing. Later, specific website software systems were developed for this activity (Figure 2 shows one version of this system), leading to other acronyms, and in recent years, it’s often called “collaborative writing” or “collaborative storytelling.” For simplicity’s sake, I am labeling this genre “textual role-playing.”

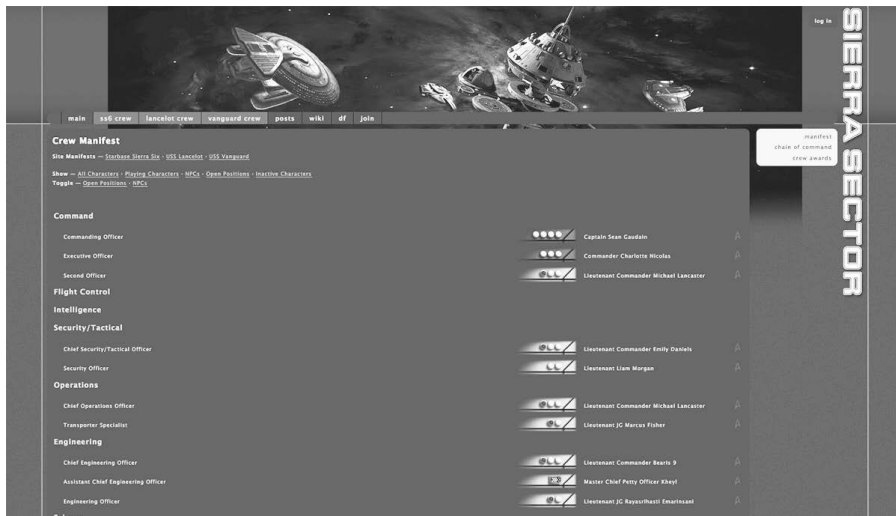


Figure 2: An example of a manifest of characters used in a textual role-playing game, from the *USS Lancelot* website, available at www.uss-lancelot.org/index.php/personnel/index/3.

This genre is distinct from fan fiction⁷ in two important ways: it uses only original characters, and authors must agree on a shared canon between texts.

⁷Fan fiction is an activity that centers around fans writing new adventures for their favorite television, movie, and comic book characters. This practice originated with *Star Trek* zines in the '70s and now occurs primarily on the Internet. Because it uses other peoples' ideas and characters, it is sometimes controversial for copyright reasons.

By contrast, fan fiction is characterized by the use of the characters native to the specific franchise or universe being explored, and there is great variety in the continuities written by different authors. It's not better or worse, but different; both genres require a significant amount of thought to do effectively.

The textual role-playing groups I found were organized into Fleets, Task Forces, and ships, with a military-style hierarchy and complex system of government in each of them. This type of writing is very similar to the kind that was produced in the first-person shooter I described above, but it had a definite advantage in terms of trajectory: anyone could read what was produced, as long as the website remained online. The intended trajectory remained internal, but the addition of surveillance by an unknown, universalized audience made attention to quality even more important.

After my first organization folded (due to reluctance to move away from the live model), I joined another of these groups, again working my way up from Ensign to Rear Admiral over several years of writing. I was part of dozens of ships (which self-labeled as “simulations,” hence the internal use of the term “simming” to describe this literate activity), most often as a crew member and occasionally as a captain (equivalent to the game master in other role-playing systems). Fresh from live role-playing, my initial contributions were fairly straightforward and non-literary; my characters served plots, because that's what the game still wanted.

The Clash Between Textual Role-playing and Creative Writing

By the time I entered Davis's class, I was accomplished in the genre of textual role-playing. It was easy for me to come up with complicated stories on the fly and to write the dialogue and technobabble to support it. I wanted to use this knowledge of an antecedent genre⁸ to ease myself into the unknown of academic creative writing (a phrase some might call a contradiction, but that is a topic for another time). I was forced to learn something new, to go into characters' feelings and motivations as they moved through the world.

The short story I produced in that class was a saccharine, insipid, adolescent love story that has mercifully been lost to the depths of time and space. (Davis told me it reminded him stylistically of Austen's *Emma*, which I'm sure he meant as a compliment . . .) This story of boy meets boy, falls in love with him, is rejected by him, and then ends up with him anyway was not my best work (as you can see from the pronoun-antecedent difficulty in this

⁸An antecedent genre is a genre you know how to produce before learning how to produce a new genre; sometimes this is helpful, but sometimes the knowledge you try to transfer actually makes it *harder* to learn that new genre because you think it's similar to the antecedent genre in ways it is not.

sentence), but it had something different from my usual writing: the plot was dependent on the characters' thoughts and emotions, on their struggles and disagreements, and not a need to find the MacGuffin⁹ or rescue the Vulcan ambassador from a Klingon plot. The characters moved the plot, rather than vice versa, at a very rudimentary sense. There was not much plot to speak of and it was a clear case of authorial wish fulfillment (the protagonist gets what he wants in the end for a less-than-clear reason), but there were no zombies or explosions.

I didn't realize at the time, but this was a pivotal moment in my development as a writer. After that class, I continued to participate in textual role-playing, but my contributions began to get longer and more sophisticated. While most players were content to work with the plot, I enjoyed the down time between missions better, when characters could relax and develop. As my prose got more sophisticated, my characters began to get more three-dimensional, simultaneously incorporating aspects of my real life (they tended to be introverted, knew Latin, and had a stand-offish sort of sarcasm) and things I wished were aspects of my real life (they were generally tall, athletic, gorgeous, and good at math). While I carefully researched characters to make sure that their backstories were believable, this level of wish fulfillment sometimes bordered on "Mary Sue" (a term borrowed from fan fiction that refers to a character who has too many skills or abilities that could unbalance the scenario), often a form of author-insertion.

After a few years, I got better about giving my characters flaws to balance out their strengths. My favorite character balances brilliance with a pathological need to enforce even the most nitpicky of regulations with Draconian glee. This was used to great comedic effect when he ended up being the only Goody Two-shoes on the entire ship.

And while I think I mastered character creation, my writing continued to upshift in a literary way. I thought this was good. In what other manner should my alter-ego (and of course my actual ego) be expressed than in glorious, unassailable literary prose? Generally, people liked this—my contributions were long and detailed. They started taking longer and longer to write, though. Where before I could write two or three sections in a given evening, as my posts got more complicated, they started taking entire evenings or sometimes multiple days to compose.

I frequently got stuck with writer's block, or worked out different ways my contributions could be written in my head over the course of a week or

⁹An example of a MacGuffin is the giant diamond the filmmakers in James Cameron's *Titanic* are searching for. It doesn't actually have a function; it's just valuable. A counter-example is the One Ring in the *Lord of the Rings*, which does have powers of its own and is quite useful.

more. As a creative writer, that is completely legitimate—no one can rush the muse. As a player in a game depending on regular contributions, it was untenable. I got more and more behind, sometimes dropping off the face of the earth for a month at a time due to anxiety about perfecting a post, and when I did contribute, my ideas were character-driven, while my friends were writing in a plot-driven way.

That is not to say that my fellow players were not excellent writers; their posts were engaging and enjoyable to read, but they managed to do them much more quickly than I did. Where textual role-playing had almost been the antecedent knowledge interfering with my performance in a creative writing class, the situation was now reversed: my identity as an academic and creative writer was making me a worse player in this game. This is what I now realize to be cross-genre interference, or competing knowledge between two similar, but distinct, genres.

I'm still very attached to many of the characters I've played with over the years, but I think I should take a page out of Davis's book and ban this sort of literary interference in my textual role-playing. As he states, "I hated imposing my alt-worlding ban. I see it as a serious offense against contemporary pedagogy, student-centered and affirming, which I support. I've never had to do this before. With any luck, I'll never have to do it again." I think that science fiction can be literary, and that characters with interesting psychologies can exist in textual role-playing, but going too far in that direction made my writing worse for the genre I was engaging with.

In an earlier draft of this article, I used the phrase "objectively better" to describe how I was writing in textual role-playing following my exposure to collegiate creative writing. This is an objectively false statement because the quality of one's writing is entirely dependent on the specific activity system in which it is created. While the exclusion of alt-worlding from mainstream creative writing is a topic worthy of its own article (or book), it is important to remember that academic creative writing is not *better* than science fiction, just like my writing was not *better* because it had hallmarks of 'literary' prose. Rather, moving too far away from the accepted genre conventions in an activity system can result in conflict. Sometimes, this conflict is productive—new genres often emerge from the interactions of existing genres—and sometimes it becomes irreconcilable. In my case, I was not aware of this interference between genres, and it was only later, through this exercise of writing research, that I was able to identify what had happened. Now I see that my trouble stemmed from an unclear understanding of the genre conventions of both collegiate creative writing and textual role-playing.

As a writing researcher looking back on this narrative and other such literacy narratives that I have experienced as a student and writer, I can now see these two activity systems as related but distinct activities; to excel in either, I must understand and be able to apply their genre conventions with intention. In closing, let us venture to the Dagobah system, circa three years after the Battle of Yavin. When Luke Skywalker comes to Yoda to learn the ways of the Jedi, he is frustrated that Yoda expects him to begin as a neophyte, but it is only when Luke unlearns what he has learned—when he is able to set aside his antecedent knowledge of what it is to be a Jedi—that he is able to understand and apply Yoda’s teachings. I did not believe that I could abandon the techniques I brought into textual role-playing from creative writing and still succeed, and that is why I failed.

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