

Writing the Role: Role-Playing Games as Literate Activity

Catelin Turman

I chose to interview my friend and husband, Alex Beisel, about his passion for writing, drawing, and designing narratives for role-playing games (RPGs). Alex has been writing and drawing since he was a child growing up in Northern Virginia, using the genres of fantasy and science fiction as a backdrop for creative storytelling. Now a first-year composition teacher at Illinois Central College, Alex also works as a content creator for Roll20, a virtual tabletop platform.

I chose to interview Alex because I have watched him work hard over the years to turn a pastime into a profession. Additionally, I thought the topic of Alex's interview was important to share with others in our community. As Alex knows only too well, RPGs as a genre are stigmatized as being reclusive, insular, antisocial and, unfortunately, misogynistic and Eurocentric. Working through Roll20, Alex strives to challenge these stigmas by telling diverse human stories with diverse players. For Alex and for Roll20, everyone should have a seat at the table. For more on Alex's views on the state of RPG writing, read on:

1. **Name:** Alex Beisel.
2. **Ethnicity (optional):** White
3. **Gender:** I am a cisgender male.
4. **Education:** I have an MS in English with a concentration in Education and American Literature from Radford University.
5. **Relationship to interviewer:** We're academic colleagues and we're married.
6. **What literate activity will you be discussing today?**

What's a literate activity? (**This was explained in careful detail**).

I will be discussing writing for role-playing games as a genre.

Can you expand on that some more?

When writing conventionally within fiction, you are writing a story that is typically protagonist oriented, but writing for role-playing games, by their very nature, must be written for the antagonist and the protagonist. As a game writer, you do not have control over the heroes; the heroes are the players. So, you can't know who will come to the table, pick up your game and play . . . instead, you write a world worth exploring and enemies only players are able to defeat. Well, not "enemies;" "adversaries" is probably better. Oftentimes the conflicts are between hero and world, hero and creature, hero and cosmic truth, and occasionally hero and dark litch lords with demonic crystals that can raise the dead.

7. How would you categorize the type of writing that was produced for this literate activity?

Creative and interactive.

How so?

Start with "creative" I guess? You have to know how to world-build. For starters, the genre expectations of fantasy and sci-fi imply new worlds, new creatures, new destinations, and players want to see those genre conventions. Subgenres like dark fantasy and horror fantasy, or with sci-fi, space opera and hard science, bring with them their own complexities to the writing style. All of this is written to entertain the players and challenge their characters; ultimately, characters are motivated by simple needs and desires that we know as humans, even if the characters are hobbits, xenomorphs, or balrogs. They want to live, to eat, to love, be loved, avoid danger and death, live up to their best selves . . . and so, RPG writing is ultimately writing pathways to those simple goals with very complex and fantastical obstacles put in the way.

As far as "interactive" goes, players are presented with these complex obstacle courses that they must overcome to achieve their goal. While the obstacle course is finite and contained within a narrative, the solutions to that problem are infinite; players can decide, based upon their own imaginations, the best (or sometimes worst) possible way to solve their problem. When all else fails, let the dice decide. I think that is all I have to say on "interactive." Did that answer the question?

Yes!

8. What genres were produced during this literate activity? Describe them.

Oh, wow, a lot. In terms of fantasy and sci-fi genres, we'd be here forever listing them all and deciding the minute differences between dark

fantasy and grim dark fantasy, and I would be the only one entertained by that conversation. In terms of literary genres, there's a great many more that are far more interesting: there's the written genre (in terms of modules produced), but many players produce comic books, podcasts, animated series, or even table talks where voice actors (and some famous actors) play Dungeons and Dragons weekly, much like a television show.

The remediation possibilities are as boundless as the genres themselves. Do you want an example?

Yeah!

OK. One of the most recognizable characters is a dark elf called "Drizzt." He features prominently within some core rule sets from the early 2000s, but he also has his own book series, his own comic series, his own video game series, and his own audio drama series, all of which depict his many legends of battle and victory.

9. What tools did you use during the production of this genre(s)?

Want me to just go through them?

Yeah, just list them.

So I usually start with these disposable Moleskine journals; they're five bucks a piece. I jot down all my story ideas in them, and then I design the interactive space for players using micron pens and some simple graph paper. Lots of dice.

What do you do with the dice?

The dice, in most role-playing games, serve as the engine for random results along a spectrum of success and failure. That's where all the excitement is. There's also narrative dice. Narrative dice don't have numbers; instead, they have symbols that a writer can interpret, much like Tarot cards, to build a story. I use these sometimes

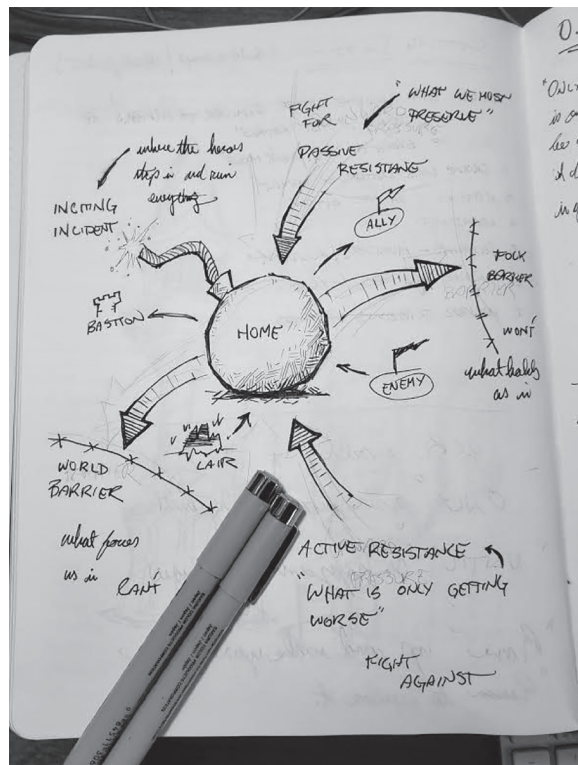


Figure 1: Design template for antagonists and contagonists.

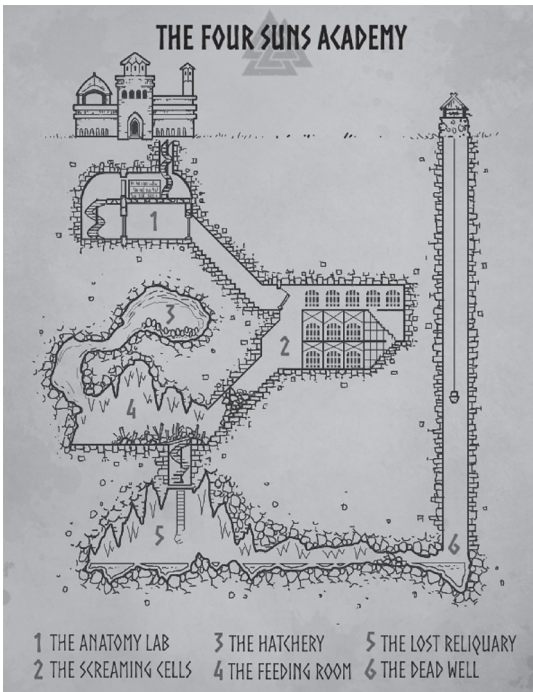
to force myself out of my comfort zone and write something that neither my players nor I ever expected to see.

Regarding other tools, I use an online platform called Roll20 to host the game with players, because players are often all over the country, and I draw all of my characters and maps using a program called SketchBook Pro.

10. Were there other people involved in the production of this genre? What were their roles?

Yes. Any role-playing game requires both a writer and a player. It might be that the player and writer are one and the same, maybe the writer will never meet the player or players, but there's a story written and a player interacting with it. That's the basics of it, but if you want to go more advanced, there's the folks who made Roll20, the legions of artists and game designers who provide their work to the gaming community on Reddit, and Dungeon Master's Guild. The community is comprised of millions of people from different generations; Dungeons and Dragons alone has been around since 1977, so you'd be hard pressed to go buy a pack of smokes without running into ten people who haven't heard of it. There's a starter set on sale at Walmart for ten dollars; anyone can play nowadays.

11. What research (if any) did you conduct while engaging in this activity?



I've done tons of research in terms of world building and creative writing, but I'm probably the exception. I have a Master's degree in English, I'm a creative writer, and something of a geology nerd, so maps, the stories for those maps, and the people who live in those maps, is something I would do as a kid, even. I would do research and draw a map. You could do it on anything; a coffee stain can become a map. The map is the biggest part of the story for me. Westeros is drawn vertically, because the story is told vertically. Middle Earth is a circle, because the story is circular. It's fun to draw a visual representation of a complex narrative.

Figure 2: The Four Suns Academy adventure map.

12. Was there any part of this activity that was negative for you? Any part that was difficult or troublesome?

By the nature of it, you don't have control of the protagonist. So, while many writers would argue that you never have control over the protagonist, this is a different animal. This protagonist is played by a real person in the real world; so, while Balasar, the dragonborn soldier, is dedicated to finding the truth of his origins, Andrew (Balasar's player) is sometimes too distracted or disinterested to remember that his character should be searching for cosmic truth instead of punching the ugliest dwarf in the pub in the face.

Making players go in the direction of your story is a lot like herding cats: sometimes they go there on their own, sometimes you need a laser pointer, and sometimes you need sedatives and a cat carrier.

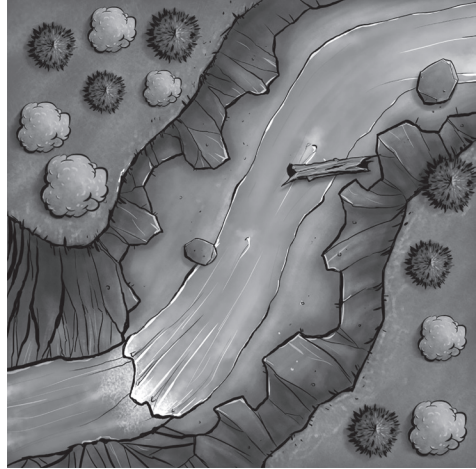


Figure 3: Battle map of River Crossing.

What do you mean, “making players go in the direction of your story?”

In my Moleskine journal, I'll note a broad plot arc. The antagonist wants to accomplish X, but first needs Y to achieve this goal. The players will find themselves confronted with A,B,C opportunities to stop the antagonist from accomplishing this goal. The players may decide that A,B, and C are far less interesting than burning down the village, starting a race riot, or overthrowing the government and declaring themselves queen of the country. And I say “queen” because another difficulty of fantasy is that it is almost inherently sexist. It's hard for the genre to be inclusive when it was founded on sexist, Bavarian fairy tales, or even Norse mythology, which is even more exclusive and racist, really.

How do you combat these issues of exclusivity?

Combat the issues of ethnocentrism and sexism?

Yes.

Have a cast of characters that is as diverse as the world around them. I let the dice decide my diversity. I'll make a list of genders, ethnicities, races in the fantasy sense, etc., assign a value to each demographic (1–100), and then

roll a D100 to determine who the baker is or who the queen of the country is.

13. What was the goal(s) of this activity? Was this goal achieved?

The goal is to entertain. I was certainly entertained, and I hope my players were too.

14. Does this literate activity affect any other literate activities that you engage with?



Figure 4: Human paladin token.

I like to draw, so this gives me a drawing prompt. It's a challenge to write about people that only dice can conjure up, so it keeps my writing style sharp. I guess improv, too, is a big part of it. I mean, you write out a story with a whole mess of characters that we need to encounter, a mystery that needs to be solved, an archvillain who needs mortality, and then, Andrew decides that he wants to buy something that doesn't exist in your world, because he's plagiarized it from another world (a video game probably), and so you have to invent a peddler of said nonexistent goods on the spot to keep the story moving. Also, there's some acting: you have to act like the character you're playing.

15. Did you learn anything from completing this literate activity? If so, how do you know that you learned it?

Players, like readers, are not motivated by loot or vengeance or gold, but by a sense of completion. Players don't want to earn experience points or new skills as much as they want to earn their place within a story. I learned these things by offering players loot, vengeance, and gold, only to find that their most satisfying experience within the narrative was when they discovered their place within it. They solved their own mystery, discovered their own origins, or laid old demons to rest. They're millionaires in terms of the game, but all they talk about afterwards is how awesome their character's story was.

The "oh shit" moment in D&D is when players react to your big reveal and find that what they thought they knew about the world was completely wrong. The players collectively and audibly cry out, "Oh, shit!" This is a writer's reward in RPG writing: when the players have forgotten that they're

playing a game, because they are so invested in the story. It's kind of like when you're watching a movie and forget you're watching a movie, or like when you're reading a book and stop applying literary theory to it, because you're that enraptured with the characters' plight and can't wait for the next scene or the next page. This is what I've learned about myself as a writer: by offering narrative closure to others, I can provide an "Oh, shit!" moment for myself. That is really the reason I write anything at all: to tell a complete narrative to someone who's willing to listen—or, in the case of RPG, to play along.



Figure 5: Dragonborn barbarian token.

So, readers, as you can see, I quoted Alex directly throughout this interview in order to most accurately depict his views on RPG writing. If you want to reach out to Alex for more RPG content, you can follow him on Twitter: [@odinsongames](https://twitter.com/odinsongames). As Alex himself signs off on all of his work, Odin bids you rise, heroes!



Catelin Turman is an English PhD student at Illinois State University studying literature and cultural studies. Her research interests include Victorian novels and feminist theories and pedagogy. She spends her free time with her two cats, horse, and husband, Alex.



Alex Beisel is a writer, illustrator, and college instructor at Illinois Central College. He's been playing with dice and reading comics for 20 years, and he spends his time with the same cats and horse as his wife, Catelin.