Intellectual Property Development in the Adventure Games Industry: A Practitioner's View

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Operating below the radar of mainstream pop culture, but saturated even more thoroughly in certain distinctive tropes and images, is the adventure games industry, also known as hobby gaming. This catchall term refers to a constellation of related products, aimed at seriously dedicated game fans whose tastes in narrative entertainment run toward the fantastic modes of the action-adventure genre. The most notable of these are the fantasy, science fiction, and superhero subgenres. Though first devised in the late 1970s by executives at the game publishing firm TSR, Inc., to apply a positive marketing tag to the then-controversial category of role-playing games, the term adventure gaming now encompasses an entire marketplace of products including other genres of games played around a gaming table, such as collectible card games, miniatures games, and a variety of board games geared to a complexity-seeking, fantasy-friendly audience.

Though each of these various subcategories offers its own distinct play experience, appealing to the various gamer tastes, their audiences overlap to some extent, bound together by a common allegiance to geek culture. All of these game forms either directly engage in (as in the case of role-playing games) or easily support the formation of large narratives. Most such games take place in an imaginary world, alternately known as a setting. Many feature a handful of iconic characters.

To practitioners in the field, including myself, the setting plus characters and other intangible elements such as emotional tone and visual style are collectively referred to as an intellectual property. An intellectual property can be seen as a large narrative or at least forms the foundation for such. These large narratives may be created by the gamers themselves as they run individual role-playing games, or consumed in a more traditional passive mode in the form of ancillary media spin-offs, including novels, computer games, television shows, and movies.

The growth of the adventure gaming hobby has led to a degree of corporate consolidation. Wizards of the Coast, the publisher of Magic: The Gathering, grew large enough to acquire TSR, the owner of Dungeons & Dragons, and was itself later acquired by the publicly traded toy giant Hasbro. Even so, adventure gaming is, to a degree no longer possible in larger sectors of the entertainment industry, dominated by entrepreneurs and creators. Role-playing games in particular have low development and production costs compared to other mass media entertainment forms, and thus provide a relatively cheap way of introducing a property to the fans who serve as early adopters for fantastic genre properties. The threads of development, however, can originate from any stop along the continuum of product categories. Once a product becomes popular in its original category, it is typically spun off into as many others as the vagaries of licensing allow.

To use myself as an example, I've written novels based on a miniatures game (Honour of the Grave, Sacred Flesh, and Liar's Peak, based on Warhammer) and a massively multiplayer computer game: Freedom Phalanx, a tie-in with City of Heroes. Another similar credit is Cathedral of Thorns, an online fiction serial to expand the world of the Dreamblade collectible miniatures game. I've designed multiple original role-playing games, including Feng Shui and The Esoterrorists, developing their intellectual properties as part of the manuscript. I've contributed to computer game adaptations of a role-playing game (King of Dragon Pass) and a collectible card game, providing additional dialogue for an early Magic: The Gathering computer game. Other role-playing designs of mine were adapted from a computer game (Rune), a series of influential fantasy stories (The Dying Earth), and HeroQuest, a preexisting fantasy world first devised for another role-playing game called RuneQuest.

The cross-pollination of intellectual properties developed for the adventure gaming industry has traditionally occurred on an after-the-fact basis. Role-playing game books typically include large sections of text, supplemented by illustrations, detailing their settings. These instructions for the game master effectively serve the purpose of so-called setting bibles, which can also be used to provide information to novelists, screenwriters, and other creators assigned to adapt the property to other media.

The term *bible* originates in television and is also employed in the computer game industry. In the former case, it is a document meant to convey the characters and conventions of a series to studio executives and the writers assigned to various episodes. In computer gaming, a bible usually includes inspirational production sketches and a description of the setting, which maintains a consistency of depiction within a team of game developers.

Recent trends in the adventure gaming sector have reduced the appeal of the role-playing game as a vehicle for launching intellectual properties. In 2000, Wizards of the Coast, in conjunction with the release of a major revamp of the game, began to allow other publishers to produce books compatible with *Dungeons & Dragons* according to the terms of the so-called d20 License. This initiative triggered one of the boom-bust cycles to which the sector is prone. Until approximately 2003, the market rewarded publishers that produced supplemental material for *Dungeons & Dragons* over those that attempted to launch stand-alone role-playing games. New and old publishers alike rushed to meet the demand for books tailored to the stock fantasy setting of *Dungeons & Dragons*, leaving by the wayside the presentation of unique new intellectual properties. In 2003, Wizards of the Coast issued a partial revision of its previous new edition, rendering somewhat obsolete the vast quantity of books sold in the previous few years. Shortly thereafter, the demand for role-playing products by publishers other than Wizards of the Coast dropped significantly, and remains soft as of this writing.

Yet publishers of other adventure gaming products continue to see the value of creating distinctive worlds, characters, and properties suitable for export to other media. Lacking a viable role-playing game market, some have

turned to creators with role-playing game and fiction experience to create or flesh out setting bibles for their new intellectual properties. Writers who work on game fiction during a property's developmental stages may also act as de facto consultants, helping to hash out issues arising from the adaptation of the setting from the game medium to the short story or novel form. For example, designers of board, card, or miniatures games may create the game around a central activity without having to worry about the traditional building blocks of character motivation. Fiction writers may find themselves quizzing the intellectual property creators on questions like, "What do these characters want? How do they get it? How do they spend their time?"

Let's say you're working with a game where its various creatures, represented by cards or other playing pieces, fight to control a particular territory on a map. The game designer may answer those questions of motivation and character in a narrow way that suits their immediate purposes: the creatures want to control that territory because they're acting out of a vaguely defined, inherent instinct. That's all the designer needs to make their game premise work. The fiction author looking at that premise immediately spots a problem: if the characters act without conscious volition, they're deprived of the choices essential to drama, even in its pulpiest form. Also, the world as currently envisioned supports only one story: creatures battling to control a location. That concept provides an obvious premise for a first story or novel set in this world, but no grounds for variation if further episodes or sequels are called for. The designer and author may then collaborate to invest the characters with the potential to make choices and undergo changes, and widen the setting to support more than one basic plotline.

Whether the large narratives of adventure gaming become a subject of concentrated academic study will be a matter of its perceived cultural relevance over time. If it does so, it will most likely be as an antecedent to computer games, whose burgeoning significance as a pop culture medium recalls the film industry of the early twentieth century. Adventure gaming is a relatively small industry, remaining vulnerable to the business vagaries of one or two

market leaders. Although I'm personally optimistic about its survival, many equally informed observers believe that it will eventually wind up on the ash heap of pop culture history. Nevertheless, the computer gaming industry, which it played a vital role in inspiring, now earns revenues eclipsing Hollywood's, and as a media form will be to the twenty-first century what film was to the twentieth.

These hypothetical future researchers into the methods of production of adventure gaming (or computer gaming for that matter) will face a few hurdles unseen in English literature or even film studies departments. As a matter of course, the creative participants—or anyone else viewing bible material in its early, developmental stages—are required to sign nondisclosure agreements. The details of these imaginary worlds as they're created are treated as proprietary commercial secrets. The creators agree not to reveal them on pain of litigation.

You'll note, therefore, an unfortunate scarcity of specific examples in this chapter.

The use of nondisclosure agreements can be seen as a ritual gesture, a signifier of the importance of the project and creative relationship to come. The adventure hobby industry has yet to see a case of nondisclosure agreement violation lead to lawsuits or scandal. That said, the non-disclosure agreements also indicate the tone of the activity. Intellectual property development is as much a business-minded act as it is a creative one. Discussions with the property's lead developer often oscillate, sometimes in the same sentence, between commercial and purely creative considerations. Certain elements are inserted because the lead developer finds them inherently fun and interesting. Others identify perceived tastes and attempt to cater to them. The classic split between instinct and intellect that governs any creative endeavor manifests itself as a balance between personal expression and market satisfaction.

As collaborative efforts, game settings raise questions of authorship familiar to students of film studies. The identity of the primary author varies by project. The designer of the original game may be the setting's sole author, but this is the exception to the rule. Unlike the traditional publishing industry, it is rare for an outside writer to successfully pitch a game to a preexisting publisher, deliver a manu-

script, and see it published more or less as is. More often, creator-entrepreneurs hatch an idea and publish it through their existing companies, or found companies to bring particular games to market. The entrepreneur who signs the checks may sketch out a series of basic concepts, determine an overall tone, and then farm out the job of creating the details to other writers, who are either employees or work as independent contractors. It is not uncommon for would-be designers who start companies to publish their own games to find themselves preoccupied with business matters, forcing them to rely on collaborators to do the creative work that inspired them to set up shop in the first place. Creator-entrepreneurs, whether distanced from the detail of setting creation by choice or necessity, can be counted on to exercise their power by requesting changes to material that fails to square with their original vision.

With fantastic properties in increasing demand in the larger movie, television, and computer game fields, portability between media is almost invariably a crucial stated concern during setting development. A tension may arise between the immediate needs of the setting to dovetail with game play and the hypothetical but attractive possibility of future lucrative media tie-ins.

Complexity levels—the largeness of the narrative—are one such point of tension. Gamers love detail. Role-playing groups in particular demand a wide set of possible narratives in which to engage their characters. Settings often include, for example, large numbers of competing organizations to which the characters might belong. The conflicts between these organizations pose a huge number of possible story lines. Nearly any hobby game requires a huge slate of creatures and characters. Miniatures manufacturers need many different types of figures, as visually distinct as possible, to sell to their customers. Trading card games likewise require multiple cohorts of fantastic beings, which offer infinite variations on a series of themes corresponding to the game's card suits.

Traditional mass entertainment media thrive on simplicity. Rather than count on the fanatic devotion—and repeat purchases—of a small coterie of extremely dedicated audience members who are heavily invested, emotionally and financially, in their products, they strive to appeal to a broad

audience. Adapting a game property to a mass form is a matter of boiling it down from a large narrative into a tightly focused one.

To cite an example, in 1995, I created a setting inspired by Hong Kong action movies that was used as the basis of the collectible card game *Shadowfist* and the role-playing game *Feng Shui*. While creating the world, its portability to other media, especially movies, was uppermost in my mind. Nonetheless, when a producer expressed interest in the game as a movie property and I set about writing a screenplay, I bumped head-on into the inherent conflict between the largeness of game narrative and the singularity of focus required by mass media storytelling.

As is common for gaming settings, *Shadowfist* included a number of competing organizations, each with its own distinctive characters, creatures, and themes, and put them at odds with one another by giving them all a common goal. In this case, the organizations of the world are embroiled in a massive, time-spanning battle for control of history, which they win or lose by seizing control of magically powerful places. By hobby gaming standards, this is a simple, bare-bones concept.

By movie standards, it turned out to be painfully unwieldy, requiring large passages of expository dialogue, even after many of the setting's organizations and signature characters were left out of the mix. The central conceit, which gave the characters an overarching motivation to justify their actions in both collectible card game and role-playing game expressions of the setting, seemed bizarre and abstract in the context of a traditional narrative.

Exposition is always a thorny matter for the genre writer, especially so in visual media like film or comic books. Even in fiction, where passages of explanatory text are more acceptable and easily woven into the narration, it must be doled out in small doses.

Yet hobby game setting material, whether published as a role-playing game, descriptive material supporting a collectible card game, miniatures, or a board game, is typically all exposition and no story. It provides a foundation for narrative by establishing an attractive imaginary world rife with possibility, but relies on the players themselves to generate the narrative during play.

This process is most visible in a role-playing game, where each player takes on the persona of a particular character he or she has created. Players supply the characters' motivations and make decisions for them. The game master supplies a situation, including supporting characters and various obstacles the player characters must overcome, weaving them together into what one hopes is a satisfying narrative. (Sometimes game masters rely on preexisting adventures or scenarios, which lay out a likely narrative for the player characters to complete, but even here the published product merely supplies a more fleshed-out blueprint for the story line, and it is in the interactions of players and the game master that the actual story finally appears.)

Traditional narrative springs from character, and is expressed through the actions that the protagonists undertake in furtherance of their goals. The central characters in a role-playing game experience are created not by the game designers but by the participants themselves. Writers assigned to adapting a property from one traditional medium to another already have their protagonists in place. They know who they are, and can be assured that they are the heart of the property and its popularity. Whenever a movie studio decides to make a film about Batman, Tarzan, or James Bond, it knows who those characters are and, one hopes, understands their appeal.

Game properties either have no set central characters, as is often the case with a role-playing or board game, or include a large number of lightly sketched characters. This latter instance pertains most frequently to collectible card games and miniatures, where characters are playing pieces (cards or figures) to which the players form an ill-defined attachment.

This attachment, since it either springs directly from the gamer's creativity or is projected on to a loosely sketched character, may create a stronger bond between audience member and media property than in a similar traditional narrative. Unlike practitioners of other media, the role-playing game designer is not the primary author of the final work. The designer collaborates with the game master and players, who create the large narratives based on the game books provided by the designer. This collaboration takes place indirectly, separated by time and space. Design-

ers receive, at best, a secondhand impression of the narratives that unfold, all of them different, in the many groups playing their games. Knowledge of this end use comes second hand, either in the form of personal conversations at game conventions or via Internet response. Moreover, it is fragmentary: I might learn that you enjoyed a given prewritten scenario or hear you describe a particularly enjoyable moment from a game. The effect is like hearing someone recount a scene from a movie you haven't seen. Role-playing narratives are so large that the game authors don't get to see them. The games themselves are building blocks for gamer creativity.

Educated guesswork, therefore, plays a considerable role in role-playing game design. The designer attempts to assemble the set of tools to best facilitate an entertaining and unique narrative for game masters and players.

Role-playing games invariably draw on well-known genres.[1] As in any media, genre provides audience members with a sense of aesthetic comfort—they're signing on for an experience like other pleasurable ones they've had in the past. The comfort zone extended by a genre becomes even more essential in role-playing gaming, serving as an easy and shared stepping-off point for gamer creativity. Knowing a genre's archetypes allows players to conceptualize the characters they want to portray, and alerts them in advance to the sorts of images and story obstacles they're apt to encounter.

Yet if a new game is too familiar, if it fails to offer any crucial points of distinction between itself and other games, it will not be adopted by sizable numbers of players. They'll already have invested considerable effort in mastering the rules of similar games, and have developed attachments to characters and situations in the large narratives they developed with those games. On the other hand, a game that departs too radically from the touchstones of the familiar will be rejected because the effort of coming to terms with its characters, tropes, images, and structures seems too great. Key to the process of role-playing game design, then, is striking a balance between originality and familiarity.

Role-playing games occupy a peculiar position in their tiny niche of a marketplace. In most outward aspects, they function like other narrative entertainment products, such

as novels, computer games, and movies. But because they allow their users to fashion theoretically boundless large narratives, they are not consumed once or twice and then put aside for new works. Instead, they engender a consumer loyalty similar to that found in the field of packaged goods, like breakfast cereals or toothpaste. The role-playing gamer, when in need of a new game product at all, seeks out another iteration—a sourcebook or adventure—of the game he's already playing.

This decision making resembles that we use when buying packaged goods. We buy the same toothpaste we always buy, or rotate our breakfast cereal purchases between a small number of brands that we already know we like. In the packaged goods sector, such a dynamic means that top brands are rarely displaced by their competitors. Enduring top brands are, with a few notable exceptions, the earliest well-executed example of their category. Where packaged goods sort themselves into categories according to function—this product cleans your teeth, and this one keeps you smelling good—role-playing games find their niches by genre. One way to find the balance point between originality and accessibility is to identify a preexisting action-adventure subgenre, and then turn it into a role-playing game before anyone else does. The original fantasy role-playing game, *Dungeon & Dragons*, is still the leader in that genre. The first superhero game to solve the problems of its genre and establish a sizable fan base was *Champions*; it has weathered the many vagaries of the industry to retain its dominance in that genre today.

Feng Shui, for example, was the first role-playing game to base itself on the new breed of Hong Kong action movies that had its heyday in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It took these films as inspiration, but then added elements to make the game more amenable to the large narratives of role-playing. A science-fantasy plot device allowed characters from the distinct main time periods of Hong Kong action cinema to interact. This allowed the addition of fantasy and science fiction elements to the modern-day shoot-'em-up ethos of John Woo. It expanded the number of potential character types available to the players. It added an element of distinctiveness, creating a setting of its own that could then be marketed as its own intellectual

property. At the time of its publication, Hong Kong movies were only dimly appearing on the Western pop culture radar screen, so elements were added to reference more accessible Hollywood action flicks. The game book was produced to match the state of the art then prevalent: it was a thick, lavishly produced book presenting a complete set of rules and large passages of setting material.

My latest game, *The Esoterrorists*, published in late 2006, reflects changed publishing conditions, and with it, a different set of design objectives. A slump in demand for role-playing games through the traditional supply chain, with brick-and-mortar stores as its end point, coupled with increased opportunities for print-on-demand books and electronic publications, have steered the market away from big fat game books like *Feng Shui* and toward shorter books featuring more narrowly tailored games.

The Esoterrorists finds its point of uniqueness by centering itself on a single technique. Its publisher, Simon Rogers of Pelgrane Press, challenged me to create an investigative game that circumvented a traditional problem of mystery role-playing: what happens when the players are meant to discover a crucial piece of information before the plot can move forward, but then fail the skill rolls that allow them to find it? *The Esoterrorists* removes chance operations from the information-gathering process, so that the players always find the clues they need, assuming they have the right skills and look in the proper place for them. It's not about whether you get the clues but instead how you interpret them.

Everything about the game, including its relatively low page count, exists to highlight this one rules concept. The setting is one of occult investigation by government agents. To keep the focus on the rules conceit, it is sketchily depicted and hardly diverges from other settings of its type. This allows game masters to flesh out the setting as they go, as a television series of occult investigation would do. Even so, the setting does have a unique hook: that the occult bad guys subvert and manipulate public opinion, with the intention of making the world seem more disturbing and surreal. When successful, their efforts soften the boundaries between our reality and the alien dimension of the Outer Dark, which in turn allows them to work sinister

magic more easily. This fuses the traditional supernatural mystery game with the topical procedural of television drama, where true crime stories are promoted as being "ripped from the headlines."

The purpose of this fusion is twofold. First, it intensifies the horror, rendering it more believable by juxtaposing it with real-life story elements not usually referenced in the genre. Second, it allows the author to indulge his penchant for satire and social commentary. Although we've only just begun exploring media tie-in possibilities, we hope that these two innovative elements will give the property life outside its central rules conceit.

The intense emotional connection that role-playing gamers feel to a property, because they have collaborated in the authorship of their experience of it, is difficult, if not impossible, to adapt into ancillary media. Fiction and to a lesser extent comic books provide a relatively low-cost way for game publishers to increase their audience's emotional connection to their worlds. Here traditional narratives can supplement the large narrative, creating the iconic characters that the games themselves lack.

A prime example of this phenomenon can be found in the *Dungeons & Dragons* tie-in novels, whose spotlight characters Elminster the Sage (created by Ed Greenwood) and Drizzt Do'Urden (created by R. A. Salvatore) have become enduringly popular in their own right. Over the years, the more successful *Dungeons & Dragons* novel lines have performed the leap game that publishers most hope for, capturing not just the core gamer audience but also additional readers who are only dimly aware of the setting's role-playing game origins.

The writer faces another set of challenges when working from a so-called bible to create an adapted work. Because they are internal documents, bibles may or may not receive the sustained editing attention given to a game product created for direct audience consumption. Often they are created early in the game creation process and then not updated as development on the core product continues. As this happens, the property's developers and managers evolve an understanding of the material that differs from the bible. Because this occurs as part of an organic, ongoing process—generally conducted under the intense time pres-

sures associated with the production of any entertainment product—the divergence between the original document and the managers' current intentions may be invisible to them. As an outside author called on to create an adaptation, it is all too easy to seize on a now-irrelevant reference and invest it with an importance it no longer warrants.

The first few adaptations from game to traditional media tend to establish a template for later efforts. The adapting writer may be in a position to lobby for changes to the primary game material that allow for easier portability into fiction or drama. The actions of characters in board, miniatures, and card games are typically abstract. Designers need consider only what happens to them within the confines and victory conditions of the games themselves. The adapting authors must be able to consider anything the characters do, and how to dovetail these with the structural demands of popular fiction.

In short, games and their ancillary media offer a wide range of unorthodox narrative challenges to their writers and designers—challenges that have yet to be codified into a set vocabulary, either from the practitioner's or critic's point of view. We practitioners are still feeling our way through it. Our talent base is too small, our form too nascent, to have spawned the profusion of how-to texts and course curricula now surrounding the film industry. Operating largely beneath academic radar we have so far mostly escaped containment within any aesthetic framework—unless you count a few overly literal attempts by gamers themselves, such as those created by designer/critic Ron Edwards and his so-called Forge movement.

The analytic part of me sees our field as rife with opportunity for further study, while the practitioner, naturally, views this prospect with suspicion and unease.

Note

1. These almost always include elements of the fantastic, from magic powers and mythical creatures, to superpowers or science fiction gadgets and weaponry. Other genres become commercially viable only with these elements added. For example, the field for many years lacked a successful Western game, despite the early appearance of *Boot Hill*, published by the industry leader TSR. Only in 1996 did designer Shane Hensley and his publishing company, Pinnacle Entertainment Group, succeed in launching a popular Western game, *Deadlands*, by adding elements of horror and fantasy to the six-guns and silver mines.

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