

## **Interview with Adam Koebel.**

### **How would you define your work? Do you define yourself as a writer, a game designer, a developer?**

First and foremost, I'd consider myself a designer. A roleplaying game is, in essence, a set of tools built for the purposes of creating narrative. Creating experiences. People who develop those tools aren't artists or writers so much as engineers; we don't make art, we make objects for creating art, if you follow. There are lots of terms for someone who makes games, but the ones that fit best are synonyms for designer, I think.

### **In your opinion, what can you do with pen & paper RPGs you cannot do with any other media?**

So much. Roleplaying games (in which I include interactive story-telling tools like *Storium* and LARPs of all kinds in addition to things like *D&D* and *Fiasco* and *Microscope*) are an absolutely unique medium for creating a narrative. They have the advantage of being ultimately flexible and completely accessible. A well-designed game presents the opportunity to its players to create something absolutely brand-new out of the gestalt of their collective imaginations, but provides enough structure and guidance to make that thing focused. It's not a stream-of-consciousness narrative with authoritative contradictions but a real, complete thing with direction and cohesion. It takes the ages-old tradition of "let's tell a story" but gives it form and structure, which is something I don't think any other media can offer.

### **You co-created *Dungeon World*. Why did you choose this setting for this hack, and how did you adapt the game system? What were your goals when you created this game?**

Sage and I were both playing a lot of *Apocalypse World* and at the time, it was really only starting to come to light what a revolutionary thing Vincent had created. I was playing a sort of silly throw-away game of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* with some friends of mine who had never played an RPG before, and their play style ("I'll tell you

what I do and you deal with the rules”) matched play of *Apocalypse World* surprisingly well. As Sage and I started to develop the game out of the seeds that Tony Dowler had created in *Apocalypse D&D*, we realized that this might actually be a really good way to introduce folks to a new way to approach the old dungeon-crawl standby.

Luke Crane talks about RPG rules as “technology” in that it’s advanced in the same way over time. That the technology we have, inherent in the roleplaying games available to us, is so much more advanced (though not universally “better” per se) than we had in the 1970s. What we wanted to do with *Dungeon World* was present a game that utilized this new technology, but in a way that would be easily adopted and understood by our audience. People might not attach to *Apocalypse World* as easily, given the style of writing, milieu of play, etc. With *Dungeon World* we’re leveraging a collective history that D&D put down.

Honestly, we realized it was something that would sell, too. There’s an element of wanting to be fiscally successful there, as well. Dungeon-crawl games are a pretty safe bet, to start with, if you’re able to differentiate yourself from the massive library of existing titles, which I feel we’ve done.

**When you write for a RPG, or you create one, what is your main inspiration? The game system, the specific background, the kind of characters players can play, the type of scenarios you can write in a specific universe?**

The main inspiration, for me, when writing a new roleplaying game, is the fiction that’s going to emerge at the table. I ask “what is this game supposed to be about” and spiral the systems out from there.

*Dungeon World* for example, is about telling the kinds of stories we remember that came from playing *D&D* as kids - narrative-focus, explosive action, that sense of wonder and exploration. The game itself, mechanically, reinforces that with every system. Every mechanism in the game should, if we’ve done our job, exist to supply players with the intended experience.

## **How would you define a game system, its purpose, its function, its role?**

A game system is a set of procedures for guiding play. For illustrating character, situation and scene in a structured way to create a specific experience. The game is there to constrain player creativity, to resolve conflict when necessary (though not always) and to guide player behaviour, moment-to-moment.

## **How would you define roleplay?**

There have been lots of essays longer and more in-depth than any answer I'll be able to give, certainly. Whole schools of thought built to answer this question. To attempt to be concise, though, I think that roleplay is a kind of narrative play in which players portray one or more characters as those characters participate in scenes. It's acting, essentially. Roleplaying without the **game** element is just freeform improvisation, which is what makes games systems so essential.

## **In your opinion, what are the best RPG(s), in substance and in form? Why?**

What makes a successful game, in my mind, is the fulfillment of the promise the designers make to the players. A game that says "this is a game about swashbuckling adventure at sea" and then goes on to provide mechanisms for tank combat and mounted archery is a failed game, in my mind. The best games are ones that understand the deep and powerful connection between mechanism, play and narrative.

## **What are your favorite game systems? Why?**

I have a rotating cast of favourite game systems - there are so many amazing, fantastic games out right now and more coming every day. So, I'll tell you what I like today. Today, I like a game called *Night Witches* which is a title by Jason Morningstar that's currently in pre-production. It's going to be an amazing examination of gender in a

framework of war and history. Jason is an artisan of games nobody else on earth would or could ever make. I'm always excited to play a new game he comes up with.

I'll always love *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*, *Burning Wheel* and *Apocalypse World*, all for what they are, what they contribute to our hobby and what they mean to game design as a discipline. I'm sure that list of eternal favourites will keep getting longer.

### **What are your favorite campaigns? Why?**

I think the best campaigns is the one you're playing, right now. I have a lot of old war-stories from table-tops past, but I think that I'm always most in love with whatever I'm playing at any given time.

### **What are your favorite backgrounds? Why?**

I don't think that I have a particular favourite setting anymore, if only because the kinds of games I've been playing lately have required that kind of stuff to emerge naturally from play - there are implied markers (we do this in *Dungeon World* but *Burning Wheel* is the king of implied setting) but no fully-built world before play happens.

In the past, though, I've been a fan of the Forgotten Realms with a sort of fondness one has for a TV show they loved as a kid. I know it's mostly shlocky and not that well-written, but for a 12 year old, it was mind-blowing. Later in life, I ate up everything that White Wolf made for *Exalted*. You'd be hard-pressed to find a denser setting in a roleplaying game than that one.

### **What do you think of the distinction between story games and RPGs?**

I think it's a spurious distinction that's been bent, mutilated and politicized to prove some kind of non-existent point. It's just semantics.

### **What do you think of the RPGs market today?**

We live in this ridiculous, blessed golden age of roleplaying games. It's easier to create, find, play and enjoy games than it's ever been and I am so happy to be even a tiny part of that.

**How do you see the future of RPGs, in substance and in form, economically speaking? (new funding plans like crowdfunding, distribution, Internet, magazines, conventions, etc.)**

I'd like to think that roleplaying games will keep getting more popular - that the audience for this type of game will grow and the industry along with it. I'd love to see something as popular as *Dungeons & Dragons* was in the 1980s but I'm not sure that's a realistic thing to hope for. I do, however, think that because of crowdfunding and, more importantly, the ease of access to a community of amazing designers, means that new games can be created and published and that they'll be **good games** when they come out. It's an amazing time.

We would never have been able to print *Dungeon World* without Kickstarter and the money we made from our campaign, but there would never have been a *Dungeon World* to sell if it weren't for all the other designers that gave us advice, feedback and the huge audience of playtesters and fans we had at our fingertips. Google Plus and Twitter, particularly, have been absolutely integral to the development of our game and the games of other new designers. Technology is changing the face of game design in a really amazing, exciting way, given that the physical artifact of design - the book - is essentially unchanged. It's a fascinating time to be making games.