

Interview with Emily Care Boss

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

My work with games is as a designer, publisher, writer and theorist. I work with tabletop and live action role playing games, as well as with fiction and traditional board games. I define myself as an independent role playing game designer. And as a theorist involved in game design and narrative analysis.

In your opinion, what can you do with RPGs you cannot do with any other media?

Role playing games have several functions which together create an experience that is unique among media. First, it is a participatory medium. Like board and video games, the strongest experience one can have is to actually engage in the activity, unlike music or sports which have strong and primary audience potential. RPGs can have audience, but it's not a primary mode of enjoyment. Second, it is a narrative form. The type of narrative can be diverse: individual or collaborative storytelling, embodiment of role, preparation of supporting text or illustrations. As in film, theater or fiction a story (or stories) are generated that show progress and change over time involving characters with motivation and effect within a fictional world context. Third, it is a decentralized and collaborative form. The participants create together original contents of the creative experience. In RPGs, they bring the shared imaginary experience into congruence (to a point) and mirror, support (or undermine) one another's contributions. As in improvisational music or dance, or in any ordinary conversation, the participants use a shared understanding of how to participate to create something unique and new, generated from the impulses and store of knowledge each brings to bear.

So, interactive (live or tabletop) role playing games have qualities of being a narrative form which is simultaneously authored and viewed by its participants which make it unique. Video games are limited (in large part) by the need for the virtual world to be pre-programmed, limiting player authorship. (MMORPGs utilize player interaction to transcend those limitations.) Fiction is a unilateral narrative experience (aside from post-modern analysis of the active role of the reader, and contemporary interactions between fanbase and author). Improvisational jazz has an attenuated fictional element, if any. The closest forms are improvisational theater and collaborative fiction. The narrative game platform Storium bridges the gap between RP and collaborative fiction, and Nordic and American freeform are very similar to a hybrid between improv theater and recreational RP.

From all of this, RP offers deeper internal experience of narrative (emotional immersion into character), empowerment for participants as creators and an open-ended aspect of shared narrative that is rare.

How did you decide to create *Breaking the Ice*? What did you want to do with this RPG you cannot find in any other? What was your main inspiration? What were your goals when you created this game?

I was inspired to write *Breaking the Ice* after participating in online conversations about people playing characters of a gender not their own. Someone made the comment in a forum that he did not believe anyone could convincingly play cross gender. I'd been playing with a group of men and women that portrayed people of various genders in a variety of ways, but all meaningfully and convincingly to my eye regardless of the gender of the player. In short, I thought this person was just plain wrong.

Some of the aspects of the game that arose from this inspiration make it stand out from most games that existed at the time, and still from the majority of RPs today. It is about a couple going on their first three dates, in a field that often shies away from love and romance. The players talk about themselves to determine how they differ, and then endow the characters with contrasting traits. Each player plays a character like the other person and unlike themselves in that way, with gender the default difference if it's being played by people of different genders. It is a two player game, to lower the social stakes of playing a character not like yourself. The game is cooperative, with specific mechanics that reward the players for listening to one another and create a dynamic of support.

What were your goals when you created *Shooting the Moon*?

Shooting the Moon arose from the simple fact that I'd written *Breaking the Ice* as a 2 player game and some groups might have an odd number of players. So having another game to go with it that could accommodate 2 or 3 seemed like a good way to do so. (It later turned out that both games are adaptable to different numbers of players, but I didn't know that at the time.) My specific goals in creating this game were to make it very accessible for new players (as I'd hoped *Breaking the Ice* would be). Both games provide a very clear story structure and a menu of options to take at any given moment of play. They have few numbers and no stats, so that the mechanical interludes are brief and straightforward. And the players take turns providing adversity (there is no single facilitator or Game Master), and are given extremely simple and direct instructions on how to do so. Being a GM always seemed like a big hurdle to playing RPGs, so I hoped this would be a good introduction to that dynamic.

You are a member of the Forge. Is it an important influence for you?

Being a member of the Forge is central to my understanding of role playing games and how they function, and to the formation of my identity as a role playing game designer. The community gave me a place to learn about many very detailed analyses of how rpgs function, and a place to hash out my own ideas. It also provided role models and allies in the process of design and publishing games. And a community of friends who continue to be huge supports and networking contacts for me in the world of games. Despite the fact that the forum itself is no longer active, its effects on my life continue to ripple outward.

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

A game system is a set of procedures, shared understandings (social, cultural and relating to fictional material) and physical or virtual materials which allow participants to collaboratively engage in a shared endeavor. A game's system can exist in various forms: the formal rules of play, the informal understandings about how they can or should be implemented, and how they actually are implemented which will vary based on the group, physical constraints, changing social mores and physical/emotional states of the participants. The purpose of a game system is to create a shared social space where this activity can take place and to provide a sense of engagement or fulfillment in the participants. The function of the game system is to create communication among the participants, generate instances of play and provide the affordances and constraints which inspire the participants. The role of a game system can be as a social contract which creates a time, place and social ordering among the participants that allows play to happen. Another role of the game system is also to allocate responsibility among the participants for the procedures needed to enact play.

How would you define roleplay?

I see roleplay as the freeform (as in not scripted as in a play) taking on of a character or point of view within a given fictional context. It can be done by embodying or acting out the role, speaking in character or summarizing a character's actions. Roleplay is used in therapy, emergency simulation, occupational training, intimate play as well as social recreation in rpgs.

A role playing game is a game which includes some form of this activity, along with many other structures which support experience and authorship of story or progressive events which involve characters and/or world.

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

Apocalypse World by Vincent Baker uses inspiring text and illustrations, decentralized materials (the playbooks and player generated rolls) with a stark and productive analysis of how a GM's role functions well in an RPG. *A Quiet Year* by Avery Mcdaldno summarizes simply and beautifully its elegant system of collaboratively creating a post-apocalyptic community through brief narration and shared map drawing.

What are your favorite game systems? Why?

Microscope because it provides a group tools to create a broad-based setting collaboratively. Live freeform systems such as *Doubt*, *Under my Skin*, *Robin's Friends*, *Play with Intent*. These games provide deeply moving play using meta-techniques that create strong situations, provide literary insight into characters, and are easy to play at a moment's notice. *Swords without Master* takes standard components of traditional play (fantasy combat, GM, frequent dice rolling) and creates a structure that weaves together player input and facilitator contributions into a dynamic feedback loop.

What are your favorite campaigns? Why?

Various *Ars Magica* campaigns I was involved in during the 1990s. Our groups embraced the troupe-style play and had deeply developed worlds which had massive input from all the players. We played dozens of characters, drew, talked about and fleshed out the history of characters and created a fully developed world that we were all deeply invested in. *Primetime Adventures* gave me some of my favorite play in the 2000s. The game used TV as a metaphor to let us create a short, well-realized arc of a story. *Swords without Master* has been my favorite campaign game of the 2010s. It lets you to play out sword & sorcery inspired short stories, and we ran a campaign that was the ongoing story of several adventurers at different points in their history. We hit the epic feel of Conan or other S&S fiction, as well as got a mysterious and wondrous magical feel.

What are your favorite backgrounds? Why?

40s-50s noir is one of my favorite settings right now. The genre takes on a lot of serious class/race/identity issues at a time when the world was changing rapidly. Another of my favorite backgrounds are high magic, low warfare settings often found in books by Patricia McKillip, Robin McKinley and others. Often very faery tale inspired, with women in strong lead roles—Brave and Frozen are good examples in popular media. These are under-represented in rpgs since so many systems focus on combat. These are backgrounds I'm using in games I'm working on now—*Last Chance Noir* (based on *Play With Intent* - <http://playwithintent.wordpress.com/>) and *Heart of the Rose*.

What do you think of the distinction between story games and RPGs? Between indie RPGs and mainstream RPGs?

Story games are an aesthetically related subset of role playing games, in my opinion. Many games that are called story games by their designers have rules light systems, offer a well-defined situation at the start of play, and have customized rules sets that are oriented toward producing fiction and player dynamics that match the premise of the game. The category of role playing games includes games which have different characteristics such as strong GM role, strict player agency limited to character action/description, and world elements represented by quantified and weighted symbolic representations of effectiveness.

Indie RPGS are published by author-controlled publishing companies, or, more increasingly, designed independently by someone and then published and distributed by a more established designer or company, with all of the creative control still residing with the original designer. Indie games often have contributions from consultants hired by the indie designer for things like art, editing, layout. Mainstream rpgs are often produced by larger companies, with a lead designer and a team of freelance or staff writers and designers, as well as artists, editors etc. The major difference is that in most mainstream games even the lead designer doesn't control the game and is paid by royalties or a flat fee, rather than taking in the profit (and facing the risks) of publishing the game themselves. The hybrid indie model I described earlier treads this line.

What do you think of the RPGs market today?

It's a robust, diverse field with many new voices and a broadening fan base. However, it's still a very small market, with entrenched financial success and fame held by mainly white male designers. RPGs have been overshadowed by electronic games, which spun off from concepts in D&D, but which have become a billion dollar industry. RPGs struggle to get a piece of that kind of pie. With print on demand, online storefronts and now crowdfunding, independent publishers have more tools at their command than ever before. The barriers to entry for an individual are much lower, but the prospect of making money is still fairly low as well. However, creative communities are at a high point. Relationships between publishers and brick & mortar retailers is in flux.

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

RPGs may become much more virtual in format. PDFs are commonly used in play, Storium is putting fiction writing and role play online in a hugely successful launch, apps are being developed for many games. New designers have a great deal more access to funding than was true before the advent of Kickstater, IndieGoGo and Patreon. However, crowdfunding brings its own challenges with scaling up production to match demand, dealing with rejection if the project does not fund, delivering in a timely way, etc. The internet is central to marketing and probably to development, since people communicate with collaborators, playtesters and players all over the world. But things have changed so much over the past 10 years, I suspect we'll have even more radical changes over the next. In the meantime, people will still keep making books, maps, cards etc.