

Interview with Paul Czege

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

Game designer.

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

I think intentionally designed RPGs can be better at changing people's behaviors and beliefs than other media. Playing an RPG imprints its template for how the world works deeply into your brain. *My Life with Master* infects players with its understanding of the workings of controlling relationships, and how to get out of them. Imagine the social and economic impact of a truly fun roleplaying game that infects players with an ability to resist powerful advertising messages and more consistently make purchasing decisions they feel good about in retrospect. Or one that changes how people think to interact with failed public institutions, ineffective school systems, corrupt politicians, or ruthless, self-interested corporations.

How did you decide to create *My Life with Master*? 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?

Almost fifteen years ago I read Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, which recommends artists doing three pages of stream of consciousness writing every day, as a way of letting your creative brain stretch and find its influence over you, and grow strong. I designed the core of *My Life with Master* as bursts of inspiration over several weeks in 2002 while doing this stream of consciousness. All I knew was I wanted to design a game where the players were the minions of a horrific master. Only later during playtesting did I realize I was inspired by my own experiences with controlling relationships.

Also, I was frustrated with the roleplaying games of the 1990s. I wanted to create a game I'd be excited to see on the shelves of the stores, one that felt like a unique roleplaying experience, with a design unencumbered by conventional wisdom.

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

It was a huge influence on me. When I graduated college, with a not-particularly-marketable literature degree, I got myself a day job and figured I'd spend some of my evenings writing what I loved, SF and Fantasy, and maybe that would turn into my real career. Well, I did spend time plotting stories in my head. But I never actually did any writing. So for a few years I lived with the self-image that I was just an unmotivated writer. But then I stumbled into the community of designers that would go on to become the initial core of The Forge. They were breaking the rules of RPG design, pushing its boundaries as an artistic medium, and my creative brain found itself then. So I hadn't been an creatively unmotivated at all. I just hadn't found my true medium. In retrospect it seems obvious. The primary creative social activity of my life had been RPGs since I was a young teenager. The Forge helped me understand that I had something to say, and that my artistic medium was RPGs.

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

This is a hard question. I design RPGs because no other medium lets me structure the creative activity of others the way RPGs do. An RPG lets me inspire others with assertions about the way the world works, and what's important in life, just the way a novelist or poet might, but then also to structure the collaboration and creativity of players in addressing those assertions.

How would you define roleplay?

Another hard question. I think part of roleplay is when you give some part of your human core of identity and needs to a system of rules that feed and structure its life in the imaginations of others; not always the same part, depending on the game; but I think it's also, simultaneously, the shared player effort of using primal human talents and the game's structures to unlock each other to powerful involvement with the game's thematic concerns.

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

I think the best RPGs have something important to say about life, the way the world works, and about human collaboration.

What are your favorite game systems? Why?

As a game consumer I'm most drawn to artistically inspired games. I think the setting in Greg Saunders' *Ruby* is pretty inspired. I think the system in Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World* is inspired. Elizabeth Shoemaker's *They Became Flesh* must be inspired by powerful life experiences she's had. Danielle Lewon's *Kagematsu* is a great game. I think *Theatrix* was a groundbreaking game.

What are your favorite campaigns? Why?

You mean published RPG campaigns? I don't think I have a favorite.

What are your favorite backgrounds? Why?

Character backgrounds? When I first started gaming I almost always played a thief. I wanted to be the clever one in my group of friends.

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

I think there's a cycle to game publishing. Someone does something interesting and new, and then over time that style of game becomes its own sub-genre, with its own hardcore fans, and as new games are published in that sub-genre they start to look more and more alike. You can see this easily in video games. Early FPS games were more unlike each other than more recent ones. I think what people call "story games" is a sub-genre of RPGs with common ideas about gameplay and collaboration. As the sub-genre gets more hardcore over time it gets less interesting to me. I think creator self-publishing (i.e. "indie") makes it easier for new and interesting games to enter the hobby; so I'm definitely pro-indie.

What do you think of the RPGs market today?

I think the kind of games I care about the most, face-to-face RPGs with systems tied to their themes, have a small, passionate fanbase, stable but not growing.

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.)

I think the rise of social media has made people more alienated from each other, not less. I think the RPG market starts growing when designers figure out a strain of RPGs that better leverage the inherent strengths of the form, and our primal talents, to create human connection.