

Interview with Vincent Baker

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

Usually I say I'm a game designer, or else I say I'm a creator and publisher of independent RPGs.

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

I can get people to give themselves fun experiences. I can get people to scare themselves, make themselves fall in love, give themselves the experience of betraying someone or going into danger.

How did you decide to create Dogs in the Vineyard? What did you want to do with this RPG you cannot find in any other? What was your main inspiration? Why did you choose the Mormons people? Why this poker-style bids? What were your goals when you created this game?

I grew up Mormon. My main inspiration was the body of family stories and history that came down to me, and my own research into the religion's history. My goal was to create a game that took my Mormon ancestors and their lives and faith seriously, while also taking seriously my own experience leaving the faith.

The poker-style bids have a straightforward technical procedural function, but I named them "raise" and "see" just to help people remember what to do.

What were your goals when you created Apocalypse World? Why, in your opinion, this game is so successful?

One of my foremost goals for *Apocalypse World* was to create a game that my wife would love to play. For years I'd been creating games she kind of hated.

I think it's been so successful in large part because of how it illuminates the act of roleplaying, and especially the relationship between the player and the GM. It's really easy and fun to play, and it keeps players and GMs – especially GMs! – coming back for more.

It can also help designers see clearly how to create the relationship between the players and GM (or between the players, if there's no GM) that their own games demand. This is, I think, one of the fundamental reasons that it's inspired so many descendent games.

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

The Forge has been closed for a few years. It pioneered both the kind of deeply personal RPG design I do and the kind of self-publishing I do. It was absolutely an important influence.

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

I wouldn't use the word "system," believe it or not. A game has a *ruleset*, I'd say, which is the piece that the designer creates. The ruleset's function is to provoke, inspire, bully, cajole, woo, misdirect, and deceive you into acting against your own normal, natural interests, into breaking your own habits and ideals of thought and action, in pursuit of some experience you wouldn't normally give yourself.

In this way, RPGs aren't distinct from any other game. This is the function of any game's ruleset.

How would you define roleplay?

To me you're roleplaying if you assign effects to agreed-upon fictional causes.

This is a very technical little definition! It's also expansive, not exclusive. It leads me to consider games like *Once Upon a Time*, *Werewolf*, and my game *Spin the Beetle* to be roleplaying games, even though you'd never market them as such.

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

My answers to this question change all the time. Here are just three of my current picks.

Beloved by Ben Lehman. It's a solo RPG with powerful lessons to teach you about love and relationships.

Dulce et Decorum by Troels Ken Pedersen. It's a Fastaval-style freeform scenario about the battlefield poetry of WWI. When you play the game, it gives you a new and visceral appreciation for these haunting and terrifying poems.

Steal Away Jordan by Julia Bond Ellingboe. You play a slave in the pre-Civil War south, hoping for freedom. It's a profoundly humanizing and hopeful game.

There are so many great games! I have to leave so many out.

What are your favorite game systems? Why? What are your favorite campaigns? Why? What are your favorite backgrounds? Why?

I don't really play many games where you can distinguish system, campaign, and background from one another. In my favorite games, they're designed together as a single whole.

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

I distinguish between creator-published games (this is what I mean by independent) and games sold by their creator to a publisher for publication, but this is a technical economic distinction about who gets paid for whose work. There's no reason for any game's players to necessarily know or care.

Otherwise, as meaningless marketing terms, "story games vs RPGs" and "indie RPGs vs mainstream RPGs" are pretty good. Various people have used them successfully to sell their games to various audiences at various times. That's fine, that's what marketing terms are for.

What do you think of the RPGs market today?

I wouldn't have any idea!

I can say that for my own weird, iconoclastic, malcontented little games, and at the scale my little game company operates, there's no end in sight. I have barely begun to reach the potential market for my games. Business is great and getting better every day.

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 see RPGs only getting more diverse. Technological developments make it easier and easier for individual creators to publish and reach an audience, which means more individual visions. RPGs are a hundred times more diverse now than they were when I started publishing, and moreso every year. To all of our great benefit! The more the better.