Interview with Christopher Kubasik

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

I always describe myself as a "story geek." I love all things story. I love taking them apart. I love putting them together. The "fandom" aspect of comic books or movies or fantasy novels eludes me. If I love something, I love it as a terrific execution of *that form*. Anything I do in this regard is a playful execution of what one can make and share with people in terms of story.

I would never presume to call myself a game designer. A "developer"? Maybe. Keep in mind I played D&D and other RPGs as a teenager. Years later I graduated from college, needed work, and began writing to keep writing. That was the goal. RPGs were one avenue that allowed this. But the focus was always story. There's no itch in me to make games. There's a huge itch to play around with stories.

You also write novels and you created the TV show *The Booth at the End*. In your opinion, what can you do with pen & paper RPGs you cannot do with any other media?

For me, the most important distinction is an utterly practical one, at the level of craft and execution:

You sit around and do this with people you like.

Keep in mind I see all of this through the prism of *storytelling*. So, I also have written novels, screenplays, TV pilots, directed plays and short film.

Here's a thing: Once you enter the world of commerce you are beholden to the people with money. I'm not being whiny are making plans to rebel against the 1% when I say this. It's just a fact. If a producer or a studio or a network cuts you a check, you are on their clock. You can fight back against foolish notes. And sometimes you win. But here, in the U.S., the person who cuts the check for a script legally becomes "The Author." (I know that's not the case in Europe, so really let that sink in for a moment.)

The tastes of producers and executives are often… sad. They are chasing an imaginary audience. They don't want to offend people or do anything to make them sad or negative. (This is foolish, by the way.) They don't want things too weird. They want things that are like other things.

So, when I sit around with my friends and make something, what are we doing? We're making something for each other. No matter how strange or weird or honest or compelling, we can keep going. No one can say, "This is too expensive." No one can say, "The audience won't like it." (We're the audience, so by definition, we like it.)

When I play the story-focused games I like, we are both creators and audience members. We're on the hook for showing up, coming playing our characters with passion and delight and imagination. The bar demands we at least try. And the other commitment is that we pay attention to each other. The games I play (Sorcerer, Primetime Adventures, and many others) demand that no one is allowed to "check out" for a while.

No one is getting paid for this. Nothing is on the line professionally. No one is doing this one thing while focusing on the "next job" and wondering if it's the right career move. We're doing it because we want to and the pleasure is our own. We *own* it.

RPGs, then, as a medium are a social activity of creativity. It isn't like writing a book you never plan on sharing with anyone. One is sharing *all the time* in an RPG. Your creativity is always on the line. But the people you are sharing with have, as their agenda, only their own creativity. They are not trying to read the minds of millions of strangers, wondering if the money spent will get such-and-such return on your investment. You do it with your friends because you want to. And if everyone is honest and playful you will be amazed and delighted and surprised and sometimes

moved.

It's playing. The way we used to play in a sandbox with our friends, making stuff up.

We live in a time where if what you are making is not designed for a profit, the making is suspect. RPGs say, "Fuck that." It is reclaiming the habit of making to make, trusting your own instincts and pleasure. And I cannot think of a better dojo for an artist of any kind than that.

You co-created *Earthdawn*. How did you imagine this mythic past of *Shadowrun*? What were your goals with this game? With hindsight, what were, in your opinion, the best ideas on this RPG? What would you do differently today?

Here's what *Shadowrun* is: Orks with Uzis. We were tasked with going backward in time to Earth's forgotten past. What happens when you strip out the Uzis? You get Orks.

Orks had already been done. So the only choice was to really up the magic. To make the age mythical. Trapped, as we were, with the Tolkien/D&D baggage, I saw my job to push all the other, unique conceits that were floating around the *Shadowrun* universe: The Insect spirits; the cross-racial politics (cultural politics is a specialty of FASA); and so on.

Ultimately, after Greg Gordon and I brainstormed for a while, we realized once you took the Uzi's out of *Shadowrun*, you really do just end up with D&D. So, we made a world which sort of rationalized why D&D is the way it is: Dungeons are old shelters that were built to protect against the Horrors; magic can't be used willy-nilly because of the problems of attracting the Horrors; legends (named swords, heroes) have powers because stories themselves have value in this magic rich world.

My goal (and Greg's) was to go really quite crazy with the magic/mythic elements. We wanted a time of utter Myth—the time of Greek Gods and Heroes; The Silmarillion; stuff like that. FASA wanted something more conservative. They wanted a game that looked enough like Shadowrun that people would feel comfortable making the connection between the two. (And I can't blame them.) So the setting became something much less crazed and intense than Greg and I would have liked to make.

Remember, that in the logic of the *Shadowrun* universe, magic rises and falls. *Shadowrun* is set at the beginning of a magic upswing. We were tasked with making a game set at a magical height. That setting would be batshit crazy. That's what we wanted. And then we were told not to do that. So, we set it on the downswing from the height.

My favorite part of *Earthdawn* is the Passions and the Questors. They were one of the few elements I could shove in to really feel like we were living in a non-bog-standard D&D world, a world that was really living at a point where magic was both overwhelming and real.

They were also fierce meat for roleplaying and storytelling. And here's why: Myth is not about using magic as a pseudo-scientific artillery. It's about the human heart—the confusion of the human heart—made manifest in the imagery of a fantastical world. The Passions made characters make choices about how they were going to live—which in turn gave grist to the Players about how they wanted their Characters to live. And that's what most storytelling is about. And I wanted more of that.

If I were to do it today I probably would use Robin Laws' work on Hero Wars, clean up the some of the rules, and build from that to create the world that Greg and I originally wanted to make.

A note about *Hero Wars* and *Earthdawn*, by the way. Years ago I came across a review of Hero Wars by Ron Edwards. In it he wrote: "that's because, in my opinion, [this game] frankly ripped off Glorantha." I found that an odd statement since I was there during the entire creation of *Earthdawn* and had never read anything about Glorantha, had never cracked open a copy of *Runequest* of any edition ever. A few years after reading Ron's comment, I got around to reading all the cool

Glorantha material produced for *Hero Wars* and thought, "Okay. I see lots of similarities!" But I decided to flatter myself that I think a lot like Greg Stafford. But, ultimately, we were both guys who back into a mythic rich world with a lot trapping from the same RPG sources. Shit happens. From that I learned creativity is not a clean and simple chain of ideas, as much as an academic might want it to be.

When you write for a RPG, 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?

When I was writing for RPGs, what an RPG could be was very limited. I was chaffing against the boundaries all the time. Have you seen my essays called "The Interactive Toolkit"?
http://www.rpg.net/oracle/essays/gamesatplay.html

I wrote them shortly before buggering off from RPGs for a while. Like I said above, I'm a story geek. And RPGs before 2000 were getting in the way of me making story with my friends.

So, I'm approaching this mostly as a *player*.

What I care about is having a game that lets me, as a player (or lets my players, if I'm the GM) run free with what they want to have their characters do.

I don't play with scenarios. I hate scenarios. I want players to come up with awesome characters, built within situations the characters care about, and the we discover what happens as the PCs push forward with actions and agendas the Players care about on behalf on the characters and the GM pushes with NPCs to add new pressure and crisis. As I say, by doing this, we end up with a story, but the story is the wake left behind as all these characters are busy doing and discovering what matters to them, what they'll do to act on what matters, what happens when they fail, how they use their triumphs.

So, I want settings that are rich are in possible situations that can grab Player interests. Are there several factions or points of view to grab onto? Awesome!

As for characters, give me a character who cares about something, is self-directed, and going to attract and cause trouble—because those are great characters.

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

To provide structure for creating characters, situation, and crisis, and to resolve moments of crisis in unexpected ways that drive the characters, situations, crisis in new directions.

How would you define roleplay?

Creating and sharing the needs and actions of fictional characters with your friends; building on the fictional details that have come before; listening to what your friends are saying, catching, and respect it by paying attention and, when you can, doing something interesting with it.

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

I love the game *Sorcerer* the most. I've written a lot about it here:
http://playsorcerer.wordpress.com

What are your favorite game systems? Why?

Sorcerer; *Primetime Adventures*; *In A Wicked Age…*; *The Mountain Witch*; *Shock*; *Hero Wars*; and, well, lots of others, with qualifiers.

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

I really don't like campaigns. They rob the players of the agency to do what they want their characters to most do. Stories are built by following the characters. We really need a lot less info if about setting and pre-packaged situation if we keep our focus on the protagonists.

Quick point: I'm playing *Sorcerer & Sword* with some friends. My job as a GM was to show up with this for the setting:

"Politics in a medieval age; Dynasties at war; Magic is strange and rare, with Old Gods, New Gods, and Pagan things in the forest. I see a walled city, under siege, burning. Go."

I said that to them. The players then came up with whatever cool characters they wanted. I will now take all the background details and situations they came with from their character and build the world out from that. I like that.

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

See the Interactive Toolkit essay linked to above.

What do you think of the RPGs market today?

I think some I'd like to play. Others I don't.

I like the ones that push the players and GM to think like people creating stories, being storytellers, sharing stories with their friends, and hearing stories their friends are making.

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 am wholly unqualified to talk about the current economics of RPGs.