

**BECOMING A BETTER WRITER
THROUGH ROLEPLAYING**
& Other Essays on Writing



WMB Saltworks
R. James Gauvreau

Introduction..... 2
Becoming a Better Writer through Roleplaying.... 3
How & Why to Build a Fandom 5
Intensive Worldbuilding 9

Nietzsche, Horror, & The Heroine’s Journey 11
A Short Essay about Short Fight Scenes..... 13
Some Thoughts on the 4th-Person POV..... 15
You Are about to Read an Essay on the 2nd-Person POV.. 16



Spirograph design by phtorxp.
© Creative Commons Zero
Find more of this artist’s work at:
» pixabay.com

Logo by NEMUIKOUGI

Introduction

This is my second (and, at least for the time being, final) collection of essays, taken from the various columns that I've written over the years and revised for context, writing style, and general polish.

My very first column was for RPG.net. This was the unimaginatively-named *Culture Column*, and it ended up being the basis for my very first Kickstarter, *Strange Nations*, a worldbuilding resource that you can download for free [right here](#). A few years after that, I started writing a second column, which was soon mirrored on [Seventh Sanctum](#). As I worked out the kinks and got some polish, I was eventually able to submit pitches elsewhere, most notably to the horror zine *Sanitarium*.

(I would advise, by the way, that you not be too cautious about making your own pitches. Always be on the lookout for an opening and don't be afraid to make the leap, even if you're unsure about your readiness. Let your would-be editor be the arbiter of that.)

Those columns have all been discontinued for a long time, what with having to concentrate on grad school and writing books for DTRPG, but many of their articles are no longer accessible and just as many were in need of revision in order to bring them up to my current standards.

If you're interested in worldbuilding, then I invite you to check out my first collection of essays, [Aliens, Dystopias, and Monster Ecologies](#).

About the author

You can email me at callmesalticidae@gmail.com. If you'd like to support more projects like this one then take a look at patreon.com/WMBsaltworks, where you'll also be kept up-to-date on what I'm working on, get steep discounts on books like this and other products, and have the opportunity to influence my future projects. You can also go to wmbsaltworks.wordpress.com, where you can find links to purchase my latest books at your preferred retailer and [commission fiction or setting material](#).

Becoming a Better Writer through Roleplaying

There was a time when every roleplaying game opened with a description of RPGs as improvised storytelling with some rules (or a lot of them, *GURPS*) to govern conflicts, &c. &c. The only thing that I find wrong with this is that none of them, to my recollection, mentioned that, if you're interested in writing stories, then it's a good thing that you picked up an RPG.

This essay is not meant to introduce you to the world of roleplaying. It's supposed to get you to see roleplaying in a form which you may not have seen before: a way to practice your writing game—and, for that matter, a way to help you actually work out certain parts of your story.

Now, using a roleplay transcript as the basis for your story is definitely frowned upon in some circles. I can remember at least once coming across submission guidelines that included it on their list of bad, horrible, no-good things that they never want to see from you. Perhaps unsurprisingly, going from roleplay to narrative has a better reputation in the world of fanfiction.

I have to admit that I looked askance at this practice in my early days, but since that time I have found roleplaying to be a useful technique for getting into a character's head, and there is a series of roleplaying sessions that has done well enough that my group is revising and converting the transcripts over into a narrative form, for our own enjoyment if nothing else.

It is not *only* in the world of fanfiction that this practice can bear good fruit, however. The characters of *Dragonlance* were developed over the course of a number of gaming sessions and, love it or hate it, the series produced almost 200 novels and tens of millions of copies. *Record of Lodoss War*, which began at about the same time as *Dragonlance*, was originally nothing more than a series of *Dungeons and Dragons* transcripts published in a magazine called *Comtiq*. Over time, however, it grew into a franchise with eight novels, fifty-six

anime episodes, twenty-three manga volumes, ten soundtracks, ten video games, and two spin-offs.

(At some point in the process the work must actually be made *good*, but what's the difference between a game-derived story that needed to be revised eight times and a story that has never heard of the word "roleplay" and also needed to be revised eight times?)

This isn't to say that you should only roleplay something which you intend to turn into a story someday. Football players never perform pushups as a part of the regular game, no matter which variety of football you are talking about, but pushups are still a useful exercise. Gaming works the same way: regardless of which position you're taking, as player or GM, you have to improvise. You need to develop at least one character, the rest of the group probably won't be happy if you need to take half an hour to figure out what your character(s) will do in this situation, and it'll be preferred that this action make sense in the context of your character's past actions. In other words, it teaches you to kill writer's block. You can't act tomorrow, you can't act in an hour, you have to act *now*, or the ogre will smack your head off.

Because railroading is generally unpopular, GMs also get training in engineering conflicts that arise naturally from the player characters and the situations that they find themselves in (whether they're rescuing the nobleman from vampires or saving the world, there needs to be something to make them *want* to do it).

Whether you simply intend to improve your skills or you want to turn your session into a story, I would suggest running one-on-one sessions with just a single person. You can rotate the position if you're both in this for the writing practice, but in my experience it's the process of being the GM—if there is one—that is most helpful one (if you're trying to get into a single character's head, of course, then you may want to be the player and let the other person, or people, play everyone else). If

you're interested in this, Kirk Johnson-Wielder has roughly four years of thoughts on the subject of two-person games, in the roleplaying column [Duets](#).

As far as GMing goes, 4chan's /tg/ board has a tradition of large-scale roleplays called Quests, wherein a number of people (everyone who cares to read along in the thread) take on the collective role of the player character. A guide to writing Quests can be found [here](#), and the forum *Sufficient Velocity* is not only another hub for Quests but hosts [an introduction to Questing](#) and a history of the [genre](#).

Adventures on the MSPA Forums are much the same as Quests, except that switching between characters is more common and there is a greater expectation that you will be drawing a lot—not *well*, just a lot. [MS Paint Fan Adventures](#) is available for hosting if you go down this route.

I wish to close with the wisdom of author and game

designer Greg Stolze, who was kind enough to reply when I asked for his thoughts on this subject:

The way RPinG has particularly helped me is by getting me out of my private hermetic headspace and forcing me to interact with other people, through story, in real time. It helps me incorporate others' interests instead of just getting wrapped up in my own concerns solely. And this is a fine balance, because "the things that interest me" are probably the things I'm most likely to write about interestingly. But writers always run the risk of becoming self-absorbed, and having to absorb others with your story, immediately, in a milieu where part of the control is in the hands of the players and part lies with dice...that cures navel-gazing really quick.

Another advantage is that, inevitably, players throw GMs curve balls and go off in wild, weird directions. Once you've handled that with some aplomb, it helps [you to] relax when you're writing alone and things go pear-shaped. The ability to relax into one's creation without losing all momentum is really valuable and improvising back and forth with players can help with that, I find.

How & Why to Build a Fandom

Fandom has a long history. A long and secret history that common men are not permitted to know, that goes back to the days of ancient...

Well, okay, fandom *really* only dates back to 1887 (people have been raving about Sherlock Holmes for a *very* long time), even if fanfiction, as such, dates back even further.

Why Write Fanfiction?

I do think that you should at least consider it. The practice may not be your cup of tea, but don't discard the idea before you give it a good look over.

Not everyone thinks that it makes sense. George R. R. Martin, bless his fanfiction-writing heart, nevertheless [thinks that it's something dirty](#): "But don't write in my universe, or Tolkien's, or the Marvel Universe, or the Star Trek universe, or any other borrowed background. Every writer needs to learn to create his own characters, worlds, and settings. Using someone else's world is the lazy way out. If you don't exercise those 'literary muscles,' you'll never develop them."

I can think of three main benefits to writing fanfiction:

1. You learn how to write within the constraints of someone else's world. Constraints, friend. Maybe you're not even very good at building worlds or characters and you want to practice *just writing stories* first, taking it one step at a time. That's good. Even if you don't have any trouble with building worlds and characters, for that matter, it's still good practice to write within certain limitations. You can set these constraints any number of ways, but there's something to be said for seeing if you can write specifically within the bounds of an already-existing personality.
2. Building your own fandom. Yes sir, visiting someone else's playground can help you to attract interest in your own.

Take Joe Ducie as an example: He [got his start writing fanfiction](#) like *Harry Potter and the Sword of the Hero* and *Harry Potter and the Wastelands of Time* until, sometimes getting thousands of reviews for each story, he [transitioned to writing original works](#) and even appeared on a *Worldbuilders* video. *Fanlore* has [a page about this phenomenon](#) if you'd like to read more about it.

3. You can also use your fanfiction to test the waters, as it were, and then translate it to original fic form if it makes a huge splash. You may be thinking that this is totally ridiculous and nobody could possibly think it could work, but, well...

Do you remember that *City of Bones* movie that out in 2013? Cassandra Clare was once—brace yourself, because this is a very inventive pseudonym that she employed—Cassandra *Claire*, writer of a *Lord of the Rings* fanfic called *The Very Secret Diaries*, and *The Draco* [Malfoy] *Trilogy*. The latter is more relevant because *The Mortal Instruments* recycles numerous characters, plot elements, and even text from *Draco*.

Exhibit B is—get read now—*50 Shades of Grey*. E. L. James really takes the cake, as the story was originally *Master of the Universe*, a sordid *Twilight* fanfic written under the name Snowqueen's Icedragon. What did James do to translate the story to the format of original fic? Just changed the names.

Fanfiction gets a bad name but it's really been going on for a long while. "Derivative work" or "Transformative work" might be better names for it, and beneath that auspice one can see quite a lot of literature in a different light. The *Aeneid* lifts Aeneas from the *Iliad*. William Shakespeare's work was heavily derivative or transformative, especially in the first stage of his career. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* gave birth to *Nosferatu* and basically every other story that ties Vlad Tepes to the vampire myth. The 19th Century story *Edison's Conquest*, an illicit sequel

to *War of the Worlds*, gave birth to some of the most fundamental tropes of science fiction, like ray guns.

If I seem to be talking an awful lot about fanfiction, this is because it's very important. Even if you personally do not write fanfiction, encouraging other people to write fanfiction of *your* work will be a very important part of growing a fandom so before moving further we need to handle any moral imperatives that you may hold against fanfiction.

What is a Fandom?

Karen Hunton of *Build a Little Biz* describes the members of a fandom as having the following qualities:

- *Ambassadors* – they will proudly tell people about you and what you do.
- *Avid* – they will soak up anything and everything you have to offer.
- *Keen* – they are happy to provide feedback, test offerings, and do trial runs.
- *Loyal* – they want what you have and aren't interested in competitors.
- *Protective* – they are the first to oust a complainer, a copycat, or a troll.

Do you want that stuff? *Do you want it?*

Kevin Kelly has described how [you only need one thousand True Fans to make a living](#). If you have one thousand people who are willing to spend \$100 on you ever year then that comes out to an income of \$100,000, minus expenses. That is some *good stuff* right there.

How do you develop a fandom, then?

1. You need to get them invested

One of the biggest things that you can do is give your audience the “feels.” Make them cry. Make them laugh. Make them hang off the edge of the seat. You know this thing.

The feels, they are important. The website *TV Tropes* has subpages for most of the works that it

lists, cataloging Crowning Moments of Awesome, Tear Jerkers, Nightmare Fuel, Funny Moments, Heartwarming Moments, and more. As their Emotional Torque page says, “The overriding goal of all storytelling is to get a reaction from the audience—a laugh, a tear, a desire to change, or maybe a desire to kill the storyteller.”

When you deliver feels, the fandom may make so much music about your work that they can make a [radio station webpage](#) that plays only that music, over and over.

2. You need to build a community

Fandoms are groups of people, so get them talking with each other. Get them to feel like there's this super special connection that binds them all together and makes them, in that one respect at least, similar to each other.

(If you know what's good for you, then you'll make sure that your work is good enough that the feeling of a super special connection is well-deserved. Your goal should not be to con the marks into sacrificing their boondollars for transient things, but to touch their souls.)

Interact with them, as well. Be approachable. Comment on the forums. Respond to emails. Ask them questions. Be *involved*. If you are not part of the community then they will not follow *you*, they will follow the work, and that is not very good if you ever want to step away and do something else.

If your fans love *you*, and not just your work—if, at the very least, they appreciate you because you are responsible for the work, then you won't have to worry about living in the gutter because everybody stole your work and nobody passed a penny in your direction for it.

3. You need to get them active

This ties into the community aspect a lot, because when the fans are active they're usually going to be active with other people, or their activity will spur the same in others. But get them active.

Harry Potter and *Lost* were the works most responsible for the creation of TV Tropes' Wild Mass Guessing pages, which are exactly what they sound like. Pretty much every detail was an element in somebody theory, because both works had proven that it was *worthwhile* to analyze the little things.

On a Livejournal post that has, sadly, gone the way of the dinosaur, Kate885 described the situation thusly:

“Chances are good that we as a fandom have figured out almost every last detail of DH [*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*]. We are infinite monkeys with infinite typewriters. The only thing left to do is discern which pieces are true and which are false. But, after two years—somebody has come up with every theory that is theoretically possible.

“I remember, back between OotP and HBP, someone actually came up with the theory that Voldemort could be keeping himself alive by splitting parts of his soul and putting them in containers for safekeeping. Yes, someone managed to correctly predict Horcruxes before we even knew what they were called. If you shoot enough arrows in the dark, sooner or later you hit the target.”

Think about the amount of activity which these paragraphs imply. If you had one thousand fans who liked to spend any portion of their time figuring out the mysteries or predicting the future events of your work, do you think that they could probably be counted on you send a lousy \$100 on you every year? Do you think that they would become True Fans?

“Become” is an important word there. Your True Fans will analyze and theorize and discuss, of course, but it is not that someone becomes a True Fan and *then* analyzes and theorizes and discusses. Rather, there is something in your work that is worth analyzing, or theorizing about, or discussing, and in process of time the person who does that will *become* a True Fan.

4. You need something worth their time

Fanfiction gets people invested, both its writers and its readers.

When people get active, they get invested. They don't spend their time writing fan novels, composing songs, or creating video games, then turn around and decide to stop caring about it. Once they get active enough, you've got a feedback loop that will generally only terminate if you do something asinine, because humans have a tendency to justify their involvement in something that they have already invested time and money in. Every book purchased increases the odds that the next one will be purchased, too, and if somebody has read two-thirds of the way through *Homestuck* then you can bet good money on that person finishing the last third if for no other reason than that the reader has already gone through the equivalent of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

This is called effort justification.

This is where I must remind you to use your powers for good, and not for evil—if you decide to use Psychology Wizardry to con people into passing coin to you in exchange for veritable mental poison, then first of all this may not work out like you want because the genuinely good stuff is common enough that it will reveal your work for the fool's gold that it is, and second, you're a bad person and you should feel bad.

5. You need to give them something to work with

I remember a conversation on the forum Dark Lord Potter that got onto the topic of why the Harry Potter fandom had gotten where it was. One thing that was pointed out as a major faction—not necessarily the biggest, just big—was that, paradoxically, there was so much room for improvement in the series. There were holes, there were things that didn't make sense, and there were plot decisions that people didn't like, and so the series straddled this weird place where it was

awesome enough to be worth reading but crappy enough that you wanted to go in and fix the stuff that you didn't like. As evidence, this commenter brought forth the sheer number of Alternate Universe, Fix Fic, and worldbuilding stories in the *Harry Potter* fandom, especially relative to some other major fandoms.

“Crappy” might not be the best word to use, really. Dark Lord Potter had a love-hate relationship with J. K. Rowling, lauding her for one quality while mercilessly tearing apart the series for another, and there may be more hostility there than is warranted. Plus, how am I supposed to advise you to write stories that are mostly awesome but just crappy enough to encourage further activity among your readers?

A better word to use might be “controversial.” Don't write stories that have just a little bit of crap in them, to try to inspire your readers to make stories where that crap isn't there. *Do*, however, write stories that encourage further engagement:

even if you resolve a romantic triangle with craft, there will be people who wanted it to be resolved another way; even if the heroic sacrifice was done masterfully, some will want to write a world where it wasn't necessary. Don't write crap but do write stories that inspire *yearning*.

This gets into another characteristic of stories like *Harry Potter*. Some works don't garner much fanfiction because they aren't well-known or they just aren't fun, but others are known and loved by all, but still pretty sterile. Why is this?

Because everything gets wrapped up. There is nothing left to fill in and nothing left to explore to after the curtain closes. There are no mysteries remaining.

Leave things open, then. Keep some threads loose and untied. Give your audience something to chew on and encourage them to go a little further past where you left them.

Intensive Worldbuilding

You need to be intense with your worldbuilding, and here's why: There are more or less two kinds of people who read speculative fiction.

There are the people who don't care about the world and just want to practice escapism, and maybe a generic world is actually a good thing because they like the formulaic stuff. It's predictable—this is why dime store romances all hit the same notes and you never hear any complaints from the genre's fans.

Then there are the people who find the biggest draw in speculative fiction to be the new world, because if all they cared about was interesting stories and character development and so on, they could find that in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Lord of the Flies*.

In essence, you have people who don't care about generic worlds and people who want something really interesting, well-thought out, well-developed. I don't want to say that one is better than the other. They're just two different kinds of audience whose reading material has a partial overlap, and you need to know who your customer is if you're going to make the sale.

You can't count on selling to the first group, however. This is important to keep in mind. You can make the most formulaic story possible but let me tell you, there are another ten thousand stories out there that are just as formulaic as that one. You can't stand out with this strategy. If you become a success with a formulaic world then it was ultimately just because you got lucky (or you had name branding, but that doesn't come out of nowhere) and the story's popularity fed on itself from there.

This means that the only kind of success that you can count on is what comes out of an extraordinarily well-developed world. To look at this in greater depth, let's talk about *The Wheel of Time* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

I have talked with fans who have raved about *Wheel of Time*, and every last one of them has admitted that the world itself is nothing new. If you have read fifty other fantasy novels then you already know the notes for this world. They recommend it instead on the basis of well-written characters, &c &c. But I can get that in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If I were a Type 1 reader, who was reading for escapism, then maybe this would be enough for me anyhow, but again, you can't count on that. *Wheel of Time* got popular but it could have just as plausibly gone another way.

You can't count on an underdeveloped world getting runaway success.

A Song of Ice and Fire has a similar problem. The way that the seasons work is kind of neat. The Others, and the fact that dragons both exist and were extinct for a good portion of time (this usually doesn't happen in fantasy, remember) are also interesting. The problem here is that it doesn't take me very long to read over all of the interesting worldbuilding in *Game of Thrones* and then... I'm done.

My biggest interest in speculative fiction is the world, and I will suffer through a bad plot or two-dimensional characters for an interesting world. If I can get the full experience of the world in a wiki binge, though, then I am not going to pay, in time or money, to read twelve books.

Contrast this, however, with Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series. It has a higher word count than *Game of Thrones* and *Wheel of Time* put together, but I'm still saddened by the fact that the number of books in that series is finite. Why? It isn't just that the series is well-written and has great characters. It also has a world that is deep enough that to make a fully accurate map of that territory would be to walk the territory itself. You can't get the full experience with a wiki binge.

This is how I got into *Homestuck*, incidentally. I tried

to do the wiki binge thing, and then I realized that I wasn't going to be able to understand everything properly unless I was willing to sacrifice my time to a work that was longer than *War and Peace*.

I'm not saying that characters and the rest are not important. I may read a story solely for its world, but I'm not likely to recommend it to another person and I'll take a story that's good in every way over one that only has good worldbuilding.

The only way that you can be reasonably confident of success, though, is if you can show the people something that they've never seen before. As I told someone else, long ago, do not settle for making your frost giants into raiders and your cloud giants into a peaceful and mysterious race, and don't just make them fantasy Mongols and fantasy Buddhists, either. Take inspiration from them, sure, but build the hell out of your world and do it like the world has never seen it done before.

Nietzsche & The Heroine's Journey

Friedrich Nietzsche is one of those philosophers that everyone has at least a passing familiarity with—

“He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.”

And if you didn't know that one, then I'm sure that you've at least heard, “God is dead,” even if you didn't know who said it first. Nietzsche has become part of pop culture in a way that few philosophers dare dream. I would like to discuss one of his lesser-known ideas (or thought experiment, really), the concept of “Eternal Return.”

Nietzsche's idea was that—as it seemed that there was an infinite amount of time in which events could play out but only a finite amount of states in which matter could exist—all events that *could* play out would do so, and not just once but an infinite number of times. Though you wouldn't be conscious of the repetition, since these others would not truly be *you*, it nevertheless remains that, throughout eternity, there would be an infinite number of people with your names, and your memories, thinking themselves to be you (and with every justification), reading this essay just as you are doing now.

“Everything has returned,” he wrote. “Sirius, and the spider, and thy thoughts at this moment, and this last thought of thine that all things will return.”

Or, to quote his possible inspiration, Heinrich Heine: “Time is infinite, but the things in time, the concrete bodies, are finite. They may indeed disperse into the smallest particles; but these particles, the atoms, have their determinate numbers, and the numbers of the configurations which, all of themselves, are formed out of them is also determinate. Now, however long a time may pass, according to the eternal laws governing the combinations of this eternal play of repetition, all configurations which have previously existed on

this earth must yet meet, repulse, kiss, and corrupt each other again.”

This is paralleled by the idea put forward by some cosmologists that, supposing the universe were infinite and we are not, say, contained in a small bubble of all the matter in an otherwise empty universe, then there is every reason to suppose that there are other places in the universe, unimaginably distant from us, which could not be distinguished from our own world. Purely by chance, these “Hubble volume clones” would share the same night sky and, even more rarely, our exact history.

Nietzsche's response to these ideas was *amor fati*, or “love of fate.” This was his “formula for human greatness,” that one would want “to have nothing different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to bear the necessary, still less to conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness before the necessary—but to *love* it.”

That is to say, if this endless repetition of events cannot be avoided, if your life with all its wonders and sorrows will recur through eternity without end, then it is a mark of weakness to reject this truth and nothing at all to merely to accept and be resigned to it. In embracing this, and likewise all unpleasant truths, however—therein would lie the triumph humankind.

The Heroine's Journey

Victoria Lynn Schmidt's *45 Master Characters* is the best treatment of what has been called the Feminine or Heroine's Journey. This is not what you call the Hero's Journey when your protagonist is female, but a different kind of narrative altogether, in which the protagonist eventually reaches the state of “embodying the willingness to go it alone and face her own symbolic death.”

It is more introspective than the Hero's Journey, but there are two big differences that are especially relevant for our purposes here.

The first is that the hero accumulates Stuff, like a lightsaber, Force powers, some swanky droids, and military rank. On the other hand, to quote Jennifer Troemner, “the Heroine’s tools fail her, or are lost. Her mental and emotional crutches are knocked out from under her. While the Hero is built up through repeated victory, *the Heroine is stripped bare by repeated defeat* [emphasis added].”

The stages of the Heroine’s Journey have names like Betrayal and Death or, if you look elsewhere, Descent into Death. There is a stronger emphasis on the katabasis, or descent into the underworld, in this kind of narrative. I would almost visualize the whole thing as a ritualistic flaying of one’s being, ala the Aztec deity Xipe Totec.

The second difference between the two is that the Heroine’s Journey is more readily cyclic in nature. The Heroine’s Journey keeps happening. It is more common for a protagonist, especially a female one, to experience the Heroine’s Journey multiple times than for a protagonist, especially a male one, to travel the Hero’s Journey more than once.

And thus we see the relevance of Eternal Return.

The Heroine’s Journey may be an ultimately upward-pointing spiral of death and rebirth but it can just as easily be adapted into the downward, repetitive cycle of an alcoholic, continually tripping on the way to rebirth and falling back into death. Or maybe nothing truly changes at all and your

protagonist keeps returning to the same circumstances through either an internal fault of character or unavoidable external conditions.

Realizing her place in this cycle and her inability to stop it, your protagonist must then decide how to react. Is she crushed beneath the weight of this “horrifying and paralyzing” idea? Or, when Nietzsche’s demon says, “This life as you now live and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more,” does she look the demon in the eye and reply, “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine,” as Nietzsche would advise?

Viewed through this lens, the Heroine’s Journey is the perfect foundation on which to build a horror story, more so than Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth. It goes hand in hand with existentialism, and if you choose to play the game straight and eventually end it with rebirth then that’s alright too.

Horror does not, after all, mean nihilism. It does not mean unremitting despair. It does not, in all cases, mean the endless night that lies in the future of every star. That night will come, and you can write about it if you want to, but there are also nights right now that don’t last forever, and your horror story can be about those as well.

Whether the light at the end of the tunnel is the Sun or an oncoming train, the Heroine’s Journey is a narrative that is adaptable enough to handle it all.

A Short Essay about Short Fight Scenes

Action scenes, especially fight scenes, have always been a lot of trouble for me. There was a time that I thought they weren't, but those stories hail from a time of very bad writing. The problem is twofold but has a single cause: How much I actually know about fighting.

First of all, I don't know enough to feel comfortable describing every blow without there being the risk that anyone who knows even a little about fighting will call me out (although now that I think about it there's some good potential in writing a detailed fight between two people who are, themselves, clueless about fighting). On the other hand, I know enough to realize that most fight scenes fall into two categories: Short or Way Too Long. I don't want to sound like That Guy, but unless the two of you are intentionally showing off, a fight in real life is most likely going to be Hobbesian in nature: nasty, brutish, and short.

One characteristic that should be present in every element of a deadly fight is shortness. Dialogue should be short or even nonexistent. Descriptions should be likewise. Sentences should be quick. Shot off in flurries. Maybe even without commas. Above all, the fight itself should be short.

The reason for this can be summed up thusly:

- a) If your characters are fighting with the intent to harm,
- b) and they have the means to fulfill this intent,
- c) then somebody is going to get messed up fast.

Before you disregard A, ask yourself why each character is fighting, if not to hurt the other party. Are they going for a sort of shock-and-awe thing to convince the enemy that a real fight would be a bad idea? Okay, then you're probably in the clear, but you should still ask yourself why your character has decided to do that, and whether your character is skilled enough to stay on top even with the disadvantage that comes with showing off.

Before you disregard B, keep in mind how easy it is to hurt somebody if you know what you're doing. Forget about conventional weapons—a strong

enough blow to the throat can break your windpipe. Even a hard blow to the groin may not kill you but will leave you open for just about anything else that comes next.

With these two points established we come to C, which is even harder to wiggle out of. A fight between people with both the desire and the ability to harm each other is going to end as quickly as someone makes one bad mistake. A few other blows might come before that, but any blow at all is going to reduce that person's ability to not make further mistakes. If both characters are masters of their art then they might last a little longer than novices, but not long enough to be very interesting.

That's the problem right there: Not long enough to be interesting. Now, in some respects this just isn't true, at least if the fight is done well. For the right stakes, a three-sentence repartee can be captivating. I'm not sure that you could call it *enthralling*, though, because there's so little of it that your attention span hardly comes into consideration. Whim, bam, slam, somebody's on the floor.

Enthralling fight scenes aren't so just because of the incidentals. The ones that we remember the most are almost always the longer ones. But I just finished explaining why, if you're concerned with realism, then you have to be more concerned the longer your fight scene is.

Some ways to draw out a fight scene

Like any good problem, this is a solvable one.

The first thing that you can do is make both parties very skilled and just as lucky. This is very contrived, and I don't think that I've personally ever managed to do it well, but in the right hands I think that it's possible. Don't count on doing it more than once in your book, though.

Another possibility is disregarding some of the other advice about shortness and zeroing in on every detail. Second to second, what are the characters feeling, physically and mentally? Give us

the panic, give us the adrenaline, give us the waves of pain from a broken rib and the will that keeps someone moving despite internal bleeding. Lavish us with it as if we're watching the scene in bullet time with an MMA commentator. Take the sensory detail and stab us in the heart with it.

For writers of speculative fiction, there are a few more options. In a story that I'm working on at the moment, people like the protagonist can quickly heal (albeit with active concentration) and can't die until they lose the mental strength to keep regenerating. Battles between such people are long, hard slogs that are as psychological as they are physical, fought with the intent to stab, crush, and beat your opponent until the pain and the effort of healing are too great to keep going anymore. In fact, pure psychological attacks can be as deadly as anything else if they make it harder for your opponent to find the strength to keep going.

Another story of mine, *The Buddha in the Road*, features characters who, being zombies, are trying to make each other nonfunctional rather than dead. Brain trauma matters to them only a little more than torn jugular veins, so the intent of each character is to take the other guy down into so many pieces that he's no longer a threat.

Both of these ideas are similar to each other (e.g. characters with superhuman toughness) but the details are enough to make both the characters and their fights distinct from each other. Whether you adapt one of these mechanics or come up with your own spin on superhuman toughness, it should still result in something fresh for your readers.

Before you start to figure out how to justify a long fight scene, though, you need to make sure that you *should*. Is this something that you can write well? Do you even need a longer fight scene? Many times, the tension in the build-up to the fight, and even the aftermath, can be more interesting than the fight itself. Like everything else, you should only bother with a long fight scene when it is going to serve the story to begin with.

Most importantly of all, don't forget the implications of your solution: your justification, whether it could only exist in a fantasy novel or is more grounded in realism, will undoubtedly have some effect on the rest of the story and its world. Even zeroing in and slowing down, as I describe earlier, will at least have an effect on the *style* of the story, which will have to be one that this technique can reasonably fit into and complement.

Some Thoughts on the 4th-Person POV

If there's a first, second, and third person, then could there be a fourth? Maybe. There's no consensus on what the fourth person point of view would actually be (and any time that I read somebody's thoughts on it, I began to wonder whether there could then be a *fifth* person point of view, so I doubt that this is something I'll soon stop thinking about in any substantial way). Even if it won't settle things, though, you may be interested (and perhaps inspired) by some of the definitions that I've found over the years.

Most of the discussion about the fourth person point of view is from websites based on user-generated content—Urban Dictionary, Yahoo! Answers, and so on.

The least satisfying definition, by far, is from [Urban Dictionary](#): *When you make a statement referring to yourself in the first and third person at the same time. Perfect for Jekyll/Hyde types, wolfmen and superheroes.* I suppose that it makes sense, in a purely additive kind of way, but how would that work in practice? “I-he am-is hungry,” or something like that? Let me know if you figure out something that doesn't leave your character sound like a confused Bizarro or a football player.

On Quora, [Sam Kaplan](#) gives the scenario of a character watching a play and suggests that it's third person when the narrator is describing that character, and fourth person when the narrator is describing that character's own description or impression of a character in the play. As Harry Dewulf mentions, this isn't exactly what we're looking for (and yeah, we might be missing the point to be looking for a fourth person point of view at all), but it's an interesting little bit on the nature of recursion in narrative.

According to [an apparently-deleted account on Yahoo! Answers](#), *The fourth person would not be separate from the first speaker. It is a presence that is part of all things, all places, and all times.* This is an interesting one, and I'm going to return to it momentarily.

[Wikipedia](#) says that *fourth person is also sometimes used for the category of indefinite generic references, which would like one in English phrases such as 'one should be prepared' or people in 'people say that' [...]* I don't think that this is what we're going for, but whatever. It's been included for the sake of completion, and to save you the trouble of looking it up for yourself.

[Dan Bergstein gets ridiculous](#) as he continues on all the way to the tenth person point of view, but here's his take on the fourth person: *First, it might mean the original narrator dies and a new narrator takes his place. Fourth person point of view may also refer to a story told by someone who wasn't there when the events took place.* I'm not sure that either of these really work, but they are quite suggestive, especially the first one, even if it's just a traditionally-numbered point of view with multiple characters.

In the context of marketing, [Douglass Karr proposes](#) the fourth person point of view as one that is *allowing the reader to interact with the writer. This could be comments to blogs, or it could be web-based forums, robust internal search, feedback forms, etc. This allows two-way communication, a much richer experience.* Karr also proposes the fifth person point of view, as one that allows the readers to communicate with each other. If we haven't already got this kind of story with *MS Paint Adventures*, *Awful Hospital*, and others, then we're very close. I like it anyhow.

The last, [suggested by Kenneth Burchfiel](#), is that the fourth person is *not an entirely new way of narrating a story, but instead a blend of first and third person that creates depth and mystery when done person.* In other words, as a later example demonstrates, it's a narrator with personality, an implied character whose details are left unspecified.

What it initially reminded me of, however, was that suggestion from Yahoo! Answers, which makes me think specifically of a narrator like the Catholic God or maybe Yog-Sothoth, something omniscient but still alive and personable, at least enough to be telling a story. An idea for later, maybe.

You Are about to Read an Essay on the 2nd-Person POV

As your eyes move from the title to the body of this essay, you commence with reading it. You quickly determine that the essay is a self-demonstrating one, which you think is kind of awkward, and you hope that the writer won't keep going with this crap for much longer.

I'll acquiesce. As the last paragraph pointed out, this is an essay about point of view, not about self-demonstrating works. For that, you might want to read David Moser.

Second-person point of view gets a bad rap much of the time. I don't think that I was ever told anything about it except, "Don't." It took seeing other people disregard that rule—plus a certain amount of contrarianism—for me to begin experimenting with it myself. Besides a whole lot of fanfiction, where it leads a very fulfilling life, however, it's still not in vogue in these modern times. The biggest example of it today is Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck*.

I'm a big fan of the second-person point of view now. I've used it in several stories at this point, either referring to the protagonist through this point of view or framing the story as a conversation between the narrator and yourself, much like Lovecraft's "Pickman's Model."

Second-person isn't a gimmick, though. Like the choice between first-person and third-person, the decision to use it should not be made haphazardly. There are three benefits to using the second-person point of view:

1. Second-person pulls the reader into the action.
2. Second-person gets personal.
3. Second-person stretches your skills and surprises the reader.

There is a reason that the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books were in the second-person. For all the technical difficulty that it can pose at times, it makes the action that much more real and

penetrating. To grossly oversimplify the mechanisms at work, your sense of empathy is based on an ability to mirror others' emotions in yourself, asking "How would I feel under these circumstances?" By using the second-person point of view, the line between yourself and the Other is blurred.

Consider this excerpt from Matthew Stover's novelization of *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*. For context, this takes place at the very end of the movie, when Anakin has returned to consciousness and has found himself in the Vader armor.

Read, and pay attention to how it makes you feel:

This is how it feels to be Anakin Skywalker, forever:

The first dawn of light in your universe brings pain.

The light burns you. It will always burn you. Part of you will always lie upon black glass sand besides a lake of fire while flames chew upon your flesh.

You can hear yourself breathing. It comes hard, and harsh, and it scrapes nerves already raw, but you cannot stop it. You can never stop it. You cannot even slow it down.

You don't even have lungs anymore.

Now let's read the same passage again, this time in the first-person point of view.

This is how it feels to be Anakin Skywalker, forever:

The first dawn of light in my universe brings pain.

The light burns me. It will always burn me. Part of me will always lie upon black glass sand beside a lake of fire while flames chew upon my flesh.

I can hear myself breathing. It comes hard, and harsh, and it scrapes nerves already raw, but I cannot stop it. I can never stop it. I cannot even slow it down.

I don't even have lungs anymore.

And again, from the third-person:

This is how it feels to be Anakin Skywalker, forever:

The first dawn of light in his universe brings pain.

The light burns him. It will always burn him. Part of him will always lie upon black glass sand beside a lake of fire while flames chew upon his flesh.

He can hear himself breathing. It comes hard, and harsh, and it scrapes nerves already raw, but he cannot stop it. He can never stop it. He cannot even slow it down.

He doesn't even have lungs anymore.

If you're anything like me then the second-person point of view cuts to your heart more deeply than the other two do.

The second-person point of view also opens the room to tricks that you can't utilize in quite the same way, if at all, when using other points of view. My story "Secret Life," which also uses the first- and third-person points of view in supplementary fashion, is able to hide important facts in the second-person that would be revealed much more quickly, if not immediately, if it were written primarily in first- or third-person.

In "Things Unsaid," another of my stories, the narrative even turns a little meta through the use of the second-person. At the end, for example, the protagonist struggles to find the words to describe a particular incident which happened in the protagonist's past but repeatedly fails. The reason for this is that the particulars of the incident are unknown to you, the reader, so of course you don't know the words to convey what really happened. By taking the reader's state of mind and mirroring it in the protagonist's, the line is blurred that much more.