

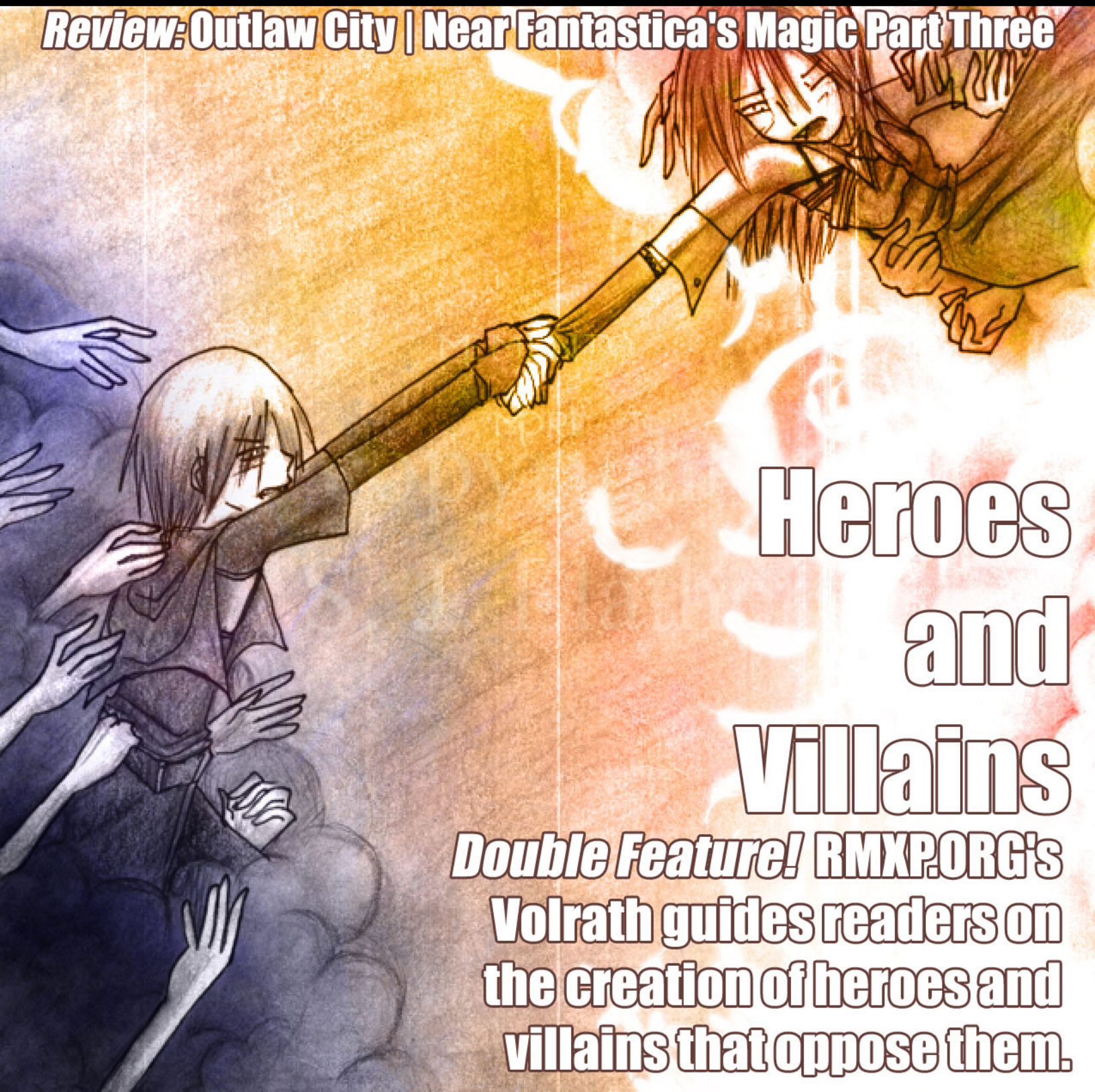
RMXP

The E-zine!
.org

RMXP.org's Official E-zine!

Issue #5 September 2006

Review: Outlaw City | Near Fantastica's Magic Part Three



Heroes and Villains

Double Feature! RMXP.ORG's
Volrath guides readers on
the creation of heroes and
villains that oppose them.

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RMXP *The E-zine!* **Submissions now OPEN!**

The e-zine is always looking for new submissions for future issues. If you have an idea for a feature, tutorial, or you just want to show off your latest story, be sure to stop by at the E-zine forum at the forums on RMXP.org for more information on how to get your articles in the next issue!

Submissions will be accepted beginning

TODAY!

Submission Deadline

September 16th

Credits

Animepaper (<http://www.animepaper.net>) for the use high quality scans and wallpaper.

Westfalia from SXChu (<http://www.sxh.hu>) for the use of "Valveny" photography featured in "Creating an Epic".

Universohq.com for use of Clark Kent/Superman action figure photography.

Find Me A Game.com for screenshots of the RPG, Brain Lord.

The regulars at **#rmxp** on EsperNet for their answers and encouragement.

Rye, for allowing the use of her beautiful artwork "Savior" to be featured on the cover.

Flash and the RRRB for providing their reviews for syndication.

Darkzero, for dealing with all my requests.

Erk and Ccoa for providing the RMX.org E-zine a new home.

All the **Readers and Contributors**, who are the lifeline of this publication! Thanks for patiently waiting.

About the Cover



Titled "Savior", the artwork found on Issue #5's cover was created by RMX.org's very own **Rye**. Originally art for her project **Memento Mori** (discontinued), she graciously allowed her work to be used in the E-zine. **Rye** has been a member of RMX.org since February 2006 and is currently working on a RMX game named **Memento Vivere—A Reminder to Live**.

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RMXP.org The E-zine Staff Spotlight!



Name: King Moogle (Zach)

Age: 19

Joined RMXP.net/org: "Erm, September 2004, IIRC... it was a long, long time ago..."

"I'm in college, love debate, mock trial, computers, and gaming. I'm training to get my A+ certification, and am employed part-time working on PCs by a group called BITS.

I love storytelling of all forms. Back when I merely wrote novels, I had three I was working on at once; each was above 8,000 words, the longest roughly 14,000. It was a good start, but I wanted to find a way to visually express my ideas; thus, RPG Maker XP was a natural fit.

I'm always open to discussion or help; you can PM me about virtually anything!"

Currently Working On: The Cerion Conception, a unique and cliché-crumbling RPG that aspires to be one of the most innovative and groundbreaking games on the market.

Link to Cerion Conception:

<http://www.rmxp.org/forums/showthread.php?t=6261>

Four Tips to Maintain Suspension of Disbelief

By BlackStaticWolf

Suspension of disbelief is an element of storytelling that I have rarely seen addressed directly. This is likely because it has the somewhat unique position of belonging to the *audience* rather than the author. It is a relatively simple concept: the audience voluntarily chooses to accept the fantastic or even impossible premises of the story. The acceptance of things like magic, dragons, and technologies so advanced that they may as well be magic are a product of the audience's suspension of disbelief. It is an important unspoken agreement between the storyteller and the audience and there is very little that can cause the audience to lose interest in an otherwise good story faster than the loss of the ability to maintain the suspension of disbelief.

The fact is it is impossible to there is nothing the author can do to restore this willingness to believe once it has been lost. The author must do their best to avoid losing the audience's suspension of disbelief in the first place. There are several pieces of advice that I can offer you to accomplish this goal:

1) Avoid Invoking Deus Ex Machina:

The deus ex machina is a plot device where an unexpected, artificial, or improbable character, device, or event is introduced suddenly to resolve a situation or untangle a plot. This is one of the most common offenses that compromises suspension of disbelief. I won't say that you shouldn't use the deus ex machina at all, but it is quite difficult to utilize effectively. When it isn't used well, it becomes a certainty that your audience will lose their suspension of disbelief.

2) Do Your Research:

In a work of speculative fiction such as a fantasy or science fiction video game, the author has the freedom to invent a great many of the rules that govern his or her world. However, there will quite likely be details that are not entirely of your own invention.

These can be relatively minor details or extremely important ones, depending on your story. Your audience will undoubtedly contain those who are familiar with elements of your story that are not your invention. Some of them will even be more familiar with these elements than you are yourself.



"For a perfect example of what not to do, just look at Clark Kent's co-workers at the Daily Planet"

For example, if your story is set in a world based on ancient Egypt, then you should make yourself as familiar with the history, culture, and religion as you possibly can, because someone in your audience will notice every time you're wrong about some detail of the culture or religion. When the audience notices these erroneous details, their belief is challenged and you can rapidly find them losing their suspension of disbelief.

3) Maintain Continuity:

A good storyteller abides by certain rules even with the details of the story that are of his or her own invention. The most important of these is that details you have set forth should not change without both good reason and explanation in the story. If you tell the audience that a

character is from West Philadelphia (born and raised), don't tell them that he's from Bel-Air two hours later with no explanation. When information given the audience is changed without even a cursory explanation, the audience's suspension of disbelief is once again challenged.

4) Make Actions Believable:

People behave in a certain way for a reason, whether or not they understand their own reasons. When characters behave in a fashion that does not make sense or that violates their established character, the audience will notice and their suspension of disbelief will be challenged. Know your characters and the reasons why they do things before you write the scenes. This simple knowledge will make it far easier to make sure that they behave in a believable fashion.

For a perfect example of what not to do, just look at Clark Kent's co-workers at the Daily Planet. All of them have met Superman on numerous occasions, yet they do not recognize that he is merely Kent with-

out his glasses. The sheer lack of basic observational abilities required for this to simply unbelievable in a crowd of investigative reporters. It's unbelievable in a crowd of anyone with functioning eyes! It's telling that this little detail is one of the most mocked features of the Superman comics, cartoons, and movies. People can believe that a man has super powers, but they can't believe that half a dozen people could fail to notice the amazingly obvious.

It's not just the actions of identifiable characters that have to be believable. Virtually every important event in your game's story happened because of the actions of *people*. The audience may not have witnessed those actions directly, but they're going to be seeing the effects of those actions throughout the story. The best examples of this type of action are those taken by nations and other large organizations. When those actions aren't believable or simply don't make sense, this challenges the audience's suspension of disbelief. In fact, this is probably one of the most severe challenges to suspension of disbelief, as the actions by large groups of people tend to be core elements of the overall story or the story's overall premise. So, make the effort to learn about how our own world actually works at a macroscopic level. Applying these principles to your fantasy worlds will allow you to have your own countries act in a much more believable fashion.

*BlackStaticWolf has been a member at RMXP.org since June 25th of this year. He is currently working on the E-zine staff as a beta reader, and is in the process of creating a game on RPG Maker XP titled **Silk and Steel**.*

Review: Outlaw City By Flash



The Black Tuesday contest received great attention and reception by the RMX.org community. Many great games were planned and promised during the short two months the contest spawned over. However, only two games were finally released on July 18th. Anaryu's gem, Outlaw City, unanimously won the contest, and with good reason. It is surprising that such a great, COMPLETE game was finished in such a short time. Outlaw city is the perfect example of what a completed game should be.

Story:

[Rating: (4) GREAT! A perfect blend of fantastic and science fiction, with intriguing characters and plot twists, even though the storyline can be hard to follow at times].

The premise of the story is similar to any of Marvel's superhero comic book. In a not-too-distant future, an artificial force field isolating the main energy source of Outlaw city is causing mutations in the populace, reminiscent of the X-men. Enter our heroine, Sahra Vintage, a writer by day and armored vigilante by night whose life is changed by a fateful lack of milk. At the grocery store, she runs into an extra-dimensional witch who goes by the name of Mystic (again, it is a reference to Marvel's shape shifting mutant; the two even share some physical characteristics). Mystic then drags Sahra into a war against Generation Corp., the city's main political influence; later against the Knights, a super-powered police force; and finally against an evil God-like entity. Along the way,

another powerful magician called Dark Sovereign and a failed Generation Corp. experiment named Proto join Sahra and Mystic to complete the all-female hero cast.

The story mixes science fiction and fantasy, using enough rubber science to keep the player's suspension of disbelief intact. The storyline flows naturally and quickly, with plot twists at every turn to keep the player interested. However, the "It wasn't us, it was them" plot twist formula is used a little too often, sometimes making the plot somewhat hard to follow. Also, some aspects like the city's mysterious Shadow Caste faction and some of the character's motivation remain unexplored or confusing.

Since the cast is rather limited, each character is rapidly fleshed out. Sahra is the typical clueless super heroine with a brave heart. Mystic and Dark Sovereign are mysterious alien creatures, with Mystic being the warmer, kinder one and Dark being the cold and calculating one. Finally, Proto is awfully talkative for a robot. One of this game's best appeal is the great character interaction those four provide, worthy of many commercial games and Television sitcoms.

At the end of the game, an extra allows you to view the bloopers: non-canonical, but funny as hell scenes of the game's main events. If anything, it's worth to go through the game to simply view these.

Graphics:



[Rating: (3.5) GREAT! Incredible mapping early in the game, which unfortunately suffers near the end. Great blend of RTP and original graphics. However, the RTP sometimes feels out of place].

Outlaw city uses both RTP and non-RTP graphics. The original graphics are used mostly in the city itself, and reflect exactly the kind of creepy, dark atmosphere the city itself is all about. However, when stepping into the RTP maps, the cheerful feeling the RTP conveys, even when it tries to be scary, destroys the dark atmosphere the city's graphic created. A simple change in the screen tone could have fixed that.



In battle, the battlers' pictures of the four heroines are probably the best piece of art of the entire game. It's a shame that several battle animations are pixelated and most of the enemies are from the default RTP.

As for the rest of the general artwork, pictures are used very well, and look very good. The different style of colored fonts used to indicate what area the player is in as they enter a new map is a very nice touch.

The mapping is very realistic in the city's streets, complete with NPCs walking up and down the roads. It is a true eye candy. The same is also true for the interiors. Even the maps using RTP were nicely filled and enjoyable. It's a shame that the mapping seems to degenerate near the end of the game, perhaps due to the Black Tuesday's contest deadline approaching too quickly. The final dungeon felt rushed compared to the rest of the game.

Audio:

[Rating: (4) GREAT! Great original or modified musical score. Good use of sounds].

The music of Outlaw City is a pleasure to listen to. The score is either original or remixed from commercial games. They fit in with the atmosphere very well. Even the music that is used often never becomes

bothersome.

As for sounds, they are well used in dungeons and in cutscenes.

Gameplay:

[Rating: (4.5) FLAWLESS!! Impressive overall gameplay. Fun, strategic battles and mind-splitting puzzles aplenty].

Even though the storyline moves along in a rather linear fashion, enabling the player to access certain parts of the city only when it is time to do so, the gameplay remains very entertaining.

Most of all, the dungeons are filled with challenging but enjoyable puzzles. Thankfully, those puzzles never become a source of frustration, as you are given the opportunity to see hints (and eventually solutions) to the puzzles every time. The only drawback to using said hints and solutions is that some valuable accessories will be denied to the player later in the game.

Outlaw City allows the player to choose the battle difficulty, ranging from ridiculously easy to suicidal. Unless the difficulty is set to very easy, the battles will require more than a simple mashing of the enter key to win, as battles, even on an easy setting, will prove to be challenging, especially later in the game. Strategy is a key element in battles, strengthening your characters, lowering your opponents' stats and dealing strong damage will win. The battles of Outlaw City are distinct from other games' battles by the fact there is no "Attack" command and by the inability to use items. Characters will instead use an array of special skills requiring stamina, in a system slightly similar to Phylomortis' battle system (albeit less frustrating).

Outside of battles, the player can unlock the character's special skills by using skill points, and later strengthen them, heighten their accuracy, reduce their stamina cost and activation time. This system allows the player to create completely custom characters, even though none of them can use the same skills.

Finally, Outlaw city spans well over 4 hours, a very good playtime for a game of this quality created in less than two months.

Overall:

It is surprising that there are so few completed RPG maker XP games out there, when such quality can be

Reviews

achieved after only two months. Granted, Anaryu had a complete team behind him, but I hope to see a lot more of good, completed games in the future. This game has proven it is perfectly possible.

Final rating:

[(4) GREAT!]

Download : http://www.rmxp.org/black_tuesday/OutlawCity.exe



*Flash has been a member of RMXP.org since March 16th. He is currently the head of RMXP.org's official Ratings and Review Board. His current RPG Maker XP project is **Utopian Chaos XP**.*

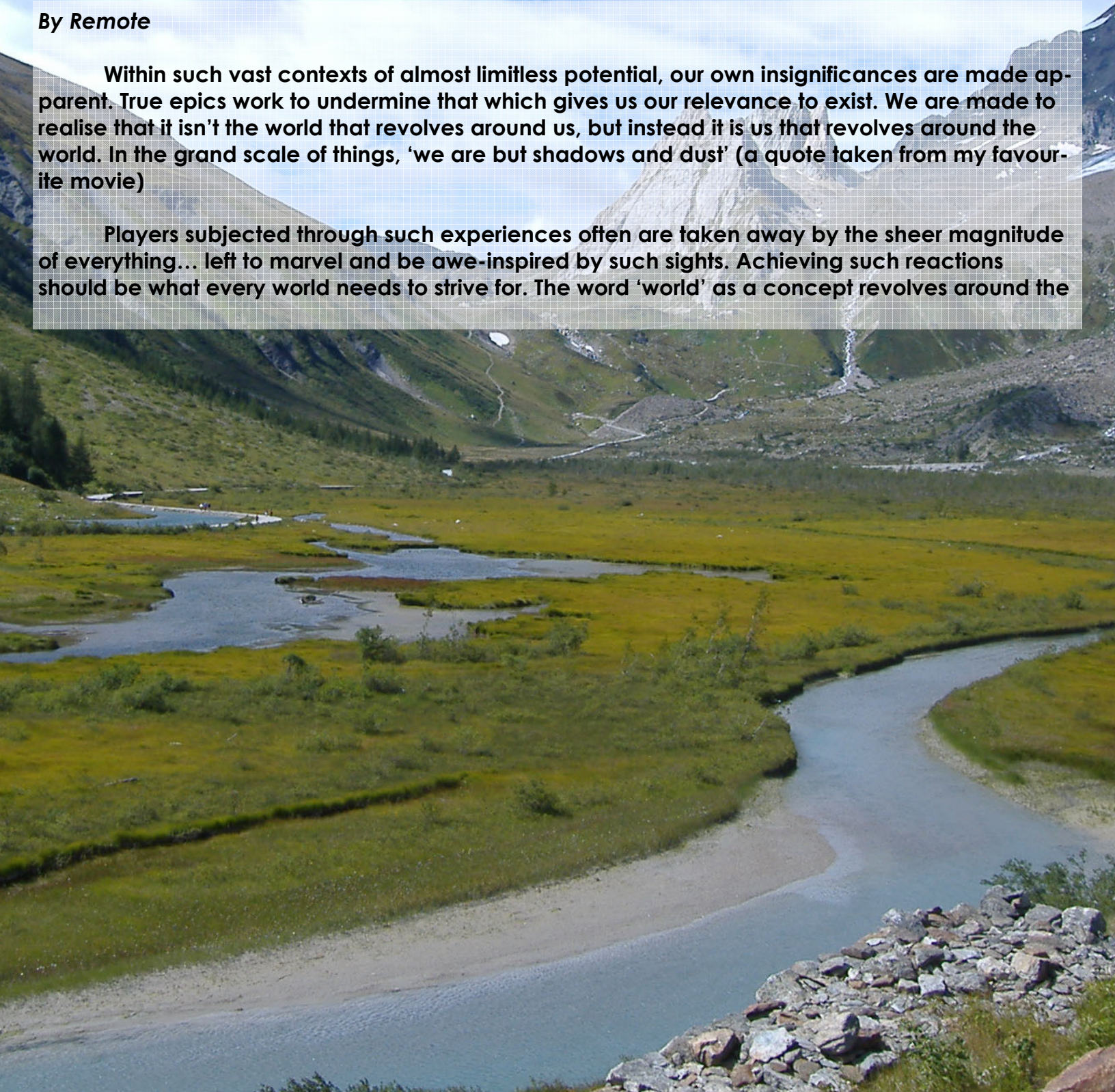
In the context of literature, when we hear the word “epic”, images of a world transcending beyond all perceivable limitations start springing to mind....

Epic Storylines Defined

By Remote

Within such vast contexts of almost limitless potential, our own insignificances are made apparent. True epics work to undermine that which gives us our relevance to exist. We are made to realise that it isn't the world that revolves around us, but instead it is us that revolves around the world. In the grand scale of things, 'we are but shadows and dust' (a quote taken from my favourite movie)

Players subjected through such experiences often are taken away by the sheer magnitude of everything... left to marvel and be awe-inspired by such sights. Achieving such reactions should be what every world needs to strive for. The word 'world' as a concept revolves around the



No More Ciphers! Tips for Making an Interesting Hero

By Volrath

Cipher, n. - One having no influence or value; a nonentity.

The word has a rich history and many other definitions, but that one relates specifically to storytelling. I decided to write this piece because I feel like this is a fairly dire problem that mostly goes unnoticed. I can't count the number of times I've played a demo or project that stunned with me great visuals or ingenious scripting....only to be painfully bored with the lead character. That kind of deficiency might not bother some gamers, but to a lover of intricate plots, layered characterization and copious amounts of dialogue like myself, it's pretty hard not to be disappointed.


Part of the reason this problem persists as much as it does is that a lot of commercial games and Hollywood movies get away with it constantly. For a recent example, let's use Orlando Bloom's character in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. Hmm...quick check at IMDB to get his character's name cause he wasn't compelling enough to remember it...ah! Will Turner. Before everyone exclaims "*Pirates* is less than perfect? Blasphemy!" let's ask a few questions. How much of the movie's appeal is based on Will Turner? Would it make a significant difference if he wasn't there? Jack Sparrow, on the other hand, is quite an effective lead. He's hilarious and unique, but also has moments where he's a self-serving jerk. Reasonably layered, but not drowning in angst by any means.

I'll come back to that. For now, let's talk heroes.

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Heroes an



The Nature of Evil: A Guide to Interesting Villains

By Volrath

Unless you're born with an incredible storytelling talent, creating a complex and interesting villain takes practice. During childhood, we're told stories that simplify good and evil to the absolute degree, and hope to instill some moral responsibility into our young souls. Disney villains, in particular, are paper-thin. (Except for Scar in *The Lion King*, he's pretty interesting.) There are some kids films, such as those of Hayao Miyazaki, that offer a more complex and realistic view of the world. Being an American, I didn't really discover those films until I was older.

Bottom line: The first time you attempt to tell a fantasy story of your own with heroes and villains, chances are they won't be the most layered of characters. It's a process that you go through as you get older and discover different kinds of stories. For the purposes of this piece, I'm going to extensively go through the process I went through the last time I had to come up with a major villain. The thought process I experienced changed the game completely, and I think that process is very instructive to all prospective RPG storytellers.

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and Villians

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The game was *Clean Slate*, a project I made for RM2K from 2001-2005. The game is unreleased, and probably will remain so. I love to tell a story, but my mapping skills...are lacking. In *Clean Slate*, the world was menaced by the Gallian Empire, a nation with the goal of wiping every non-human off the face of the earth, justifying it with twisted religious rhetoric. It was meant to convey my immense disgust for religious fundamentalism (Islamic or Christian) being mixed in with government and military. Foremost among these dark crusaders was General Lysander Barca. Lysander (named after a Spartan general who fought in the Peloponnesian Wars, not the creator of "A Blurred Line") was a powerhouse, a vicious warrior skilled in both physical and magical combat. He led devastating massacres all over the world, but was best known for his assault on Rellenia, the elven capitol city. The place was left in ruins and Lysander became a new hero within the city of Gallia.

Pretty despicable dude, right? That's what I thought at first. I figured anyone who would do these things had to be the most callous scumbag in the history of life. That's exactly how I portrayed him at first. In his early scenes, he's making maniacal comments, lashing out indiscriminately, and even makes a joke about cheating on his wife. It seemed to work at first, but as the game moved along something came to be. This wasn't honest.

The fact is, and this was initially a little difficult for my NYU-educated liberal mindset to accept, religious fundamentalists are still people. They have feelings, dreams, ambitions and motivations. There were important questions I had to ask about Lysander. Why was he willing to fight so hard for these ideals? What made him believe what he believed? How could he shut his mind to the suffering of those he had killed?

Not easy questions. After some thought, I had the answer. Nobody is born with hate in their hearts. They learn it. The title *Clean Slate*, which originally was meant to comment on the amnesia of Arius, the main character, suddenly had much more meaning. We come into this world as clean slates, and as we grow up the important people in our lives write upon us. This was what happened to Lysander. His father, Hamil Barca, dreamed that his son would be an even greater warrior than he was. He instilled the Gallian code into Lysander as soon as he could talk. There was one key scene depicting Lysander as a teen that paints a good picture of what he was taught. Lysander has just witnessed the murder of an elf:

Lysander: Why did this person have to die?
(Sob) In another life, he and I could have been

friends...or comrades. (Pause) I'm sorry....

Hamil: You should be sorry! That kind of talk is blasphemous, Lysander! Remember the god you serve!

(At this point, Lysander's good-natured little sister Molly, who managed to develop her own values despite the household she was living in, rushes to comfort him.)

Lysander: Thanks Molly, but Father is right. I must conquer these feelings if I will ever be able to serve Arcadius.

Hamil: Good, son. I knew you wouldn't let me down.

Now, none of this meant to be an excuse for Lysander's behavior. He could have followed Molly's example and stood up to his father, but he went down the path that led to fame and respect within Gallia. It's meant to be an explanation.

Another thing I realized was that growing up these of values must have made Lysander very committed to the idea of a traditional family. In other words, he would *never ever* cheat on his wife. As soon as I realized this, that line of dialogue went the way of the dodo. In fact, Lysander's unshakeable loyalty to his wife, Lynnia, and his son, Leonard, added another side to him, a side that was almost gentle.

Near the end of the game, the full extent of Lysander's motivations is revealed. As Arius and the other main characters stand in a position to strike the final blow against Gallia, Lysander must choose his next course of action. His friend, a psychic named Erva, tries to talk him into leaving the city and starting a new life somewhere else.

Erva: Lysander, please! Let's take your son and go! Even if Gallia wins this day, our time is ending. The world moves on. We can't expect to rule forever.

Lysander: There may be truth in what you say, but I must not abandon the people of this city. I am the only one who can save them.
(Pause) For them, I will fight.

Taken out of context, this scene would make Lysander look like a stalwart hero! He sees himself as a protector of the Gallian way of life, but it has never occurred to him that a way of life involving intolerance and murder is not worth defending. Eventually Lysander is killed in the final battle, ending Gallia's reign of terror. It was a victory for Arius and the other heroes, but many people who played *Clean Slate* told me that

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the victory came at a heavy price. They had felt sorry for Lysander. The pride I felt when I first heard this is something that all us RPG Makers deserve to experience at least once in our careers. And to think, I was just going to make him an asshole.

At this point, you may be thinking: "Do I have to make all my villains that complicated? What about the bad guys you just love to hate? The ones that you can't wait to get your revenge on?" Well, those kinds of villains are valuable, too. Just remember that even the most obnoxious and depraved person has some kind of motivation. It doesn't have to be motivation we can necessarily sympathize with, either. For an example of this, I'll use another character in *Clean Slate*: Ariel D'Eleficient.

Ariel was a powerful sorceress who often fought alongside Lysander. Unlike Lysander, who killed for the sake of his mission and the city of Gallia, Ariel had a lot more fun helping to fulfill the Gallian dream of a world populated by humans alone. Of course, she wouldn't be afraid to kill a human if she felt like it. She was in love with Lysander, though, and desperate for his attention. As we've discussed, Lysander, was committed to his wife and had no intention of betraying that trust. It made Ariel more interesting, but no less evil. I don't think anyone who played the game was thinking "Oh, poor Ariel. Lysander won't return her love." It was probably more along the lines of "Man, Lysander's smart to stay away from a chick who's that f***** insane!"

Let's move on to another character. This time we'll draw from *Master of the Wind*, a game that Artemis Bane and I are currently collaborating on. The character is Andau, a vampire who menaces the seaside town of Port Arianna looking for fresh blood to drink. The sinister vampire is something of a stereotype in RPGs, much like the evil emperor, the dark knight, the hideous demon or the big stupid ogre. When you use a character like this, it becomes even more important to get under their skin. In Andau's case, he was a fairly normal young student who stumbled on to a young girl being chased by soldiers. Well, she was being chased for a reason. She was a vampire and her bite turned Andau into one as well. The player hears this back story when the two main characters, Shroud and Stoic, discover his diary while roaming around the dingy church that Andau has made his home. It suddenly made sense to them why the vampire so frequently targeted young girls. He was committed to a never-ending quest for vengeance.

Another way to make a neat villain is to go against type. Instead of an evil ogre, how about an evil elf? Instead of a corrupt old emperor, how about a

sinister old woman who seems harmless at first? Elves are particularly effective because we have such a reinforced image of elves as these ethereal, soft-spoken, high and mighty mystics who talk about destiny and give us bitchin' swords. In *Master of the Wind*, there's an elf named Morias who enjoys robbing banks and setting explosive traps. It makes for a pretty subversive and entertaining character.

Any kind of villain can be interesting as long as the depth is there. Only major villains deserve the long flashback and monologue treatment, but with smaller antagonists, just make sure clues are given to their feelings and motivations. For my final example, I'll use a character I think we're all familiar with. The creators of Sephiroth in *Final Fantasy VII* could have just relied on his badass long hair and huge sword to establish his villainy, but they didn't. Over the course of the game, we learn a good deal about him. Genetically engineered by Shin-Ra from the DNA of a hideous alien creature, he fought in Midgar's wars against Wutai. Eventually he discovered his origins, though, the knowledge of which drove him mad and gave him a severe God complex.

That's a cool story, and it makes for a compelling villain—one with depth, motivation, and an intriguing backstory.

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1. Write LINES for your hero.

It may seem obvious, but plenty of famous games have overlooked this element. As much as I love *Chrono Trigger*, it was hard to be terribly moved when Lavos disintegrated Crono given that he had not uttered a single word. We always hear that these silent protagonists are "meant to represent the persona of the player," but that really isn't why I play RPGs. Something like *Resident Evil*? Sure. (Though ironically, those characters seem to never shut up) *Dragon Quest*? No. I want to be told an epic story, not constantly imagine what this dude in a bandana is thinking at every moment. Some of this is no doubt a matter of personal taste, but I maintain that this method will never produce a truly memorable hero.

2. Unstoppable DOES NOT EQUAL Interesting.

You know the type. A hard-edged behemoth with a sword roughly the size of Utah. He speaks only in vague half-sentences. He's a Solid Snake rip off placed in a medieval environment and he'll slice apart 1,000 soldiers before breakfast.

She's got a body possible only in bad anime. She wears the same glare on her face 24/7. She purports to represent some kind of extreme feminist hatred of men despite the fact that her clothing seems designed exclusively to be enjoyed by the very people she loathes. She's a buxom fantasy placed in a medieval environment and she'll spin kick 1,000 soldiers before breakfast.

These characters are stupid. They are also dull. Nobody wants to follow a character who will never be challenged. A hero needs obstacles to overcome. He needs to become stronger as the journey (and the skill level) progresses. This is basic storytelling stuff. Stop imitating your favorite anime and start telling a real adventure!

3. Break Away from Genre Clichés!

Before 2003, the typical pirate was nothing like Jack Sparrow. Hollywood pirates were heavy-set macho men with bristling beards. Then along came this swaggering effeminate lunatic that had clearly spent way too much time out in the sun. The producers initially balked at Johnny Depp's bizarre interpretation of this character, but he knew better. Now it's hard to imagine pirate movies before the age of Jack Sparrow...and with *Cutthroat Island* in mind, perhaps it's

best not to...

Fantasy is clearly the most popular genre we see RMXPs used with (sci-fi is big too, but I've never considered myself much of an expert on that genre, so I'll stay away from that one), so let's discuss that for a bit. We all know the typical hero for most of these games. A young farm boy/young grandson of village elder who will find something odd outside of his village, report it to the government, and return to find his village burned to the ground. With nothing left to lose, he picks up his sword and vows to avenge his lost loved ones.

RPG leading characters have worked themselves into such a rut that even having a female lead seems audacious. Go beyond that, though. These are fantasy worlds, so show us something unfamiliar. The idea of a non-human lead character (and I don't mean some silly emo half-demon adolescent...I mean a goblin or something) is criminally underused. Also...the hero *does not have to be a teenager!* As hard as it can be to resist a good old coming-of-age tale, the years of puberty are not the only time in a person's life where he/she learns something. To draw briefly from my game, *Master of the Wind*, Cade Mistral is about twenty years old. He's done with adolescence and has his own place and his own job. Still pretty young, I know, but he also hangs out with a skeleton who's about a thousand years old.

Again, be creative. Even a small deviation from these tired formulas is always welcome. I'm sure plenty who will read this have seen *Record of Lodoss War*. Think of Parn. They don't come much more bland than that. Show us something we haven't seen before.

4. Flaws are your friends....

We've gone over how lame it is to have heroes who are unstoppable in battle. Let's take that point further and make it clear that perfect personalities are also a no-no. The "Mary Sue" heroine who is beautiful, confident, intelligent and charming all the time may get you some young male fans, but serious writers look upon those kind of characters with harsh derision. People are not perfect, and flaws are the key to making a character genuinely interesting.

I'll briefly go through the four lead characters in *Master of the Wind*. Sure, Cade Mistral is young, blond and very suave with the ladies, but there's an-

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other side to that. He's always had an easy time attracting women, so he takes them for granted. Half the time, he hurts their feelings without realizing it. He's also prone to the occasional fit of self-righteousness. Bones the skeleton has a short temper, but those who laugh at his insults and complaints may not consider that a flaw. He's also much too secretive. Finley Donner's simplistic viewpoints about life are meant to provide comic relief, but the guy has absolutely no tact whatsoever. Auburn Iliaca is striking and confident, but she allows herself to get locked into situations that she is unhappy with and lacks the personal strength to reach for what she really wants.

Creating a layered character takes practice. First-timers will find it extremely difficult, often falling back on what could be called "stock flaws." Being shy around girls, for example. It's something a lot of us go through (I was painfully bashful in high school), but it isn't always appropriate. Chances are that when you are creating a character, you focus on the strong points first. The key is to think about what problems might come with those strengths. Let's say you have a female character that is just amazingly gorgeous. What could be bad about that? What if she's always coasted through life on those looks? What if she never really bothered to learn any real skills?

The key is balance. Jack Sparrow is a deceitful lout, but he's so funny that we love him anyway. Get players to accept your characters the way we accept our friends and loved ones. The right dialogue can make a character's flaws endearing and adds to the fun.

5.but don't overdo it.

There's a flip side to this whole flaws discussion that must be addressed. Perfect heroes are lame, but the opposite extreme is just as bad. You surely know what I'm referring to. The tousle-haired basket cases that stand under trees in the rain and pontificate about how they've made so many bad choices and how they've driven away everyone who loves them. It takes exemplary writing to make a train-wreck character appealing, so my advice is not to attempt a complete wreck unless you're feeling *really* confident in your storytelling skills.

Aside from the current vicious backlash all over the Internet regarding anything that could be regarded as even slightly "emo," angst-ridden characters are just flat-out difficult to write well. In one of

my early projects, I had a character that hated his life because he had been rejected from a prestigious knighthood. A good reason to be upset, but my dialogue for this guy was pretty uninspired. Constantly, it was "I'm worthless," "Why would anyone ever want me around?" "If I died, it wouldn't matter." We all feel like this sometimes, but people in real life who talk this way are trying enough. Most players who encounter that kind of negativity in their games are likely to just turn the thing off.

Creating an interesting hero is tough, but these four rules will serve you well. I look forward to a day when I'll be trying out a demo and I'll be glued to my seat not because of great scripting or beautiful mapping, but by a lead character who makes me care what happens to him. We all know those are the games we remember the most.

*Volrath has been a member of RMXP.org since May 6th. He is working on a RPG Maker XP project titled **Master of the Wind** with his partner ArtBane.*

Bad Game Designer! No Cookie for You! By Ccoa

Physics 101

Time and again I watch game heroes push huge blocks of stone that must mass around **two** tons without breaking so much as a sweat, and yet they can't force that locked door or push that pesky NPC blocking the path out of the way.

We are talking about a fantasy world, and we ask that our players suspend disbelief and accept magic, gravity-defying hair and Armageddon-level weaponry in the form of a sword. However, there does come a point where a game designer can go too far.

We have learned the natural rules of the Universe so thoroughly that they live at the instinctive level of our minds. If the rules of physics otherwise apply to your world, then a sudden instance when they don't can be jarring to the player, momentarily disrupting his immersion in the story.

Take Sonic the Hedgehog for instance, whose mid-air direction changes would have Isaac Newton spinning in his grave. **If** you're going to make a world where one or more of the natural laws don't apply, make sure you do it consistently and from the very beginning of the game, and integrate it smoothly into **your world**.

Fantasy Killers, Twenty Years to Life

Building on the last point, don't include features that are **exceedingly** different from **what** fantasy the game is supposed to be providing. Mini-games and puzzles should fit seamlessly into your world. If I've been slaying monsters left and right, and then come upon a boss who wants to play cards instead, you've probably just slain my fantasy experience.

Consistency is the key. If one dungeon is filled with puzzles, then all dungeons should be filled with puzzles, unless you have a very good (and visible to the player) reason to only have puzzles in that one dungeon.

If you have a minigame, it should make sense to play that minigame at that point in time, and not just seem like pointless extension of gameplay.

For example, if I need a special spice to cure a friend's fever, then it might make sense to have a cooking competition, a la Iron Chef, to get it. It probably wouldn't make sense to have a sit-up competition for it, no matter what cool idea you have for that minigame.

What am I, a Pawn Shop?

Heroes often spend more time trading in secondhand weapons and armor for bright shiny armor, which they will promptly resell, than they do saving the world. They steal trinkets from dead enemies, and quickly go sell those off, too.

I'd rather get on with the business of being a hero than dicker endlessly with one shopkeeper after another. While the endless upgrade of weapons is something that will probably be a part of every RPG from now until eternity, it should never be a central feature of a game unless you've got some new and interesting take on it, like a cyborg that will break down without routine maintenance and upgrades.

This brings us to my next point about those darn grave robbing heroes.

Look! Sword-Wielding Rats!

I've just finished a desperate battle with some rabid looking rats. What's this? A potion, some gold, and a sword!

Which leads to several disturbing questions: How does a rat carry a sword? Why would a rat pack around gold? And if they had a sword and were capable of carrying it, why didn't they use it on me? Or, at the very least, why didn't they imbibe that potion when I was kicking their furry little butts instead of kindly saving it for me to pick up after they were dead?

Monsters packing treasure is a bad design feature that somehow manages to be incorporated into nearly every RPG. Goblins, trolls, brigands, wizards, they'd all be expected to have loot on them when you slay them. Dire wolves, gryphons, and other bestial monsters lack hands, pockets, and bags to carry things with, and, whatever society dire wolves have, I doubt very much it has a use for human-minted gold

coins.

Stupid, Stupid Rat Creatures!

Why is every single monster you encounter in fantasy so stupid? They attack blindly, cast a spell or two at predictable intervals, and rarely seem to concentrate on your most vulnerable ally, exploit weaknesses, or use recovery spells or items appropriately. Why, I ask?

The reason: laziness again. Dumb monsters are easy to program, whether it's in RMXF or in a commercial game. It's also easier to balance a game with dumb monsters. Everyone fights them in exactly the same way, so you can easily tell how many potions to leave strewn around and how much health Hero A should have.

Show some genuine care for your game, and some sympathy for your thumb-sore button-mashers, and program some intelligent enemies in there.

The Universe can go Stuff Itself

How believable is it, really, that one person can save the world/galaxy/ universe? And why should we care about something so big and abstract?

Give us a nice and personal conflict that we can really care about – the hero trying to get medicine for her dying mother or trying to escape from a corrupt politician, for example. If she saves the world along the way, so much the better, but don't expect your player to instantly care about the fate of a world he was just introduced to a few hours ago without giving him something, or several somethings, within that world to genuinely care about.

"You're in a Maze of Twisty Passages, All Alike"

The all-text Infocom game *Adventure*, later re-done as *Colossal Cave*, had perhaps the most infamous badly designed dungeon in history. Seeing as how it was one of the first electronic games, period, this can perhaps be excused. What can't be excused is, several console and computer generations later, people are *still* designing bad dungeons.

Players should never wander randomly through a dungeon, with only guesswork to tell them which way to go next. Mazes are fine, so long as the route can be guessed, and the dead ends are few, rewarding, or both. Mazes should be attractive, clever, and

fun to solve.

An example of a well-designed maze is the underground train maze in *Myst*. Although the maze appeared to be random at first glance, astute players would soon notice a pleasant chime when they pointing the train in the correct direction, eliminating the guesswork from then on, and leaving the player feeling clever to have figured it out.

Puzzle, or Insidious Torture Device?

Puzzles in RPG's tend to fall into one of two categories: straightforward, and obscure. Straightforward puzzles usually involve a locked door or blocked passage that requires some obvious action, like pushing blocks, finding a key, or triggering a switch. More on these in a moment.

Obscure puzzles, on the other hand, often rely on outside knowledge to solve. If I have to know what the name of the third NPC from the right was in an obscure RPG, I'm not only going to close the game, I'm going to delete it and reformat my drive just to purge all traces of it from my computer.

Make sure the player can solve your puzzles using only the information available to him in game.

Stop Being Lazy and Put Some Thought Into It.

One of the worst examples of a puzzle is the Infocom adventure game *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In this game, if you didn't pick up the junk mail at the very beginning (and you were only given one opportunity to do so), then the game was unsolvable at the end. This is lazy puzzle design: artificially extending the play length of the game without extending the fun factor.

Perhaps the most common instance of lazy puzzle design is the locked door. If you encounter a locked door, then there are usually only two possibilities: the door can be unlocked via a puzzle in that room, or the door can be unlocked via a switch or key that is located on the other side of the dungeon.

Just placing a key or switch at the farthest point from the door is lazy dungeon design. Why would a mysterious race building doors in caves lock their doors, and then hide the key as far away as they could manage? Bad Designer! No cookie for you.

Forget Lateral Thinking, Let's Move This Baby

into the Gauss Plane

Making puzzles that require some lateral thinking is good. Let's face it, the first time we encountered a "push this button and the door opens"-type "puzzle," they were already old. But making a puzzle where the solution is deliberately obscure or irrational is, once again, lazy design. You can extend the user's play time by making a puzzle where he has to guess he needs to walk in a circle three times, but I guarantee you that he won't find that extra play time enjoyable.



In the early RPG Brain Lord, the puzzles incorporated medium to fiendishly difficult mathematical problems and riddles.

Similarly, even if the answer to your puzzle isn't completely obscure, don't make it overly difficult to get to. Very little of your target audience wants to sit down and calculate pi to the 100th digit. If you absolutely must include a puzzle of brain wringing difficulty, then provide an alternative path for those who prefer brute force to intellectual dallying.

It's My Way or the Highway, Baby

In RPGs, many simple puzzles have one and only one correct solution. If you come to a locked door in real life, how many different ways can you go about opening it? You could call a locksmith, smash it down, try to pick the lock, or try to get someone on the other side to open it for you, in addition to the classic RPG options of either push the switch or find the key.

Shouldn't we, as game designers, be encourag-

ing creative thinking? Give the player more than one way to get through the dungeon, around an obstacle, or past a monster.

Leave Your Hormones at the Door

Unless there is a good reason for your characters to be skimpily dressed, or naked, don't have them skimpily dressed or naked. Female warriors need armor on their bosoms, midriffs, and thighs to stop those sharp swords and teeth.

Are all of your male characters fully dressed, and your female characters wearing a scrap of silk? Maybe you should rethink your costume design.

Now, that is not to say you can't have skimpily dressed characters. Perhaps they belong to a society where skimpy dress is the norm (in which case most or all your characters should be under clothed). Perhaps they live in a futuristic society where armor is a force field, and they can wear whatever the heck they feel like under it. But be sure you're doing for a logical reason, and not just to show girl (or boy) flesh.

"I Don't Like Sand. It's Coarse and Irritating and it Gets Everywhere."

Bad acting can ruin what would otherwise be a good story. Actually, it can ruin something that was otherwise total rubbish, too, which is one of the great unsolved mysteries of the Universe.

If you're going to have voice actors, make sure they're *good* voice actors, and you get the right voice to the right role. Better to have blessed silence than listen to garishly bad line reading. The same goes for bad writing. Good dialogue is the unspoken half of the equation when gamers complain about voice work. Without decent lines to read, even the most commanding performance by an actor is worth very little.

In fact, whether spoken or not, your dialog should be convincing and natural. If you would nominate a film with your lines for a showing on Mystery Science Theater, then perhaps it's time to rework them.

What is this, a daycare?

I was about halfway through the Playstation game *Legend of Legaia* when the spiky blue-haired hero announced he was thirteen years old. I shut off the game in disgust and didn't come back to it for

weeks.

Commercial game characters are young and male because their target audience is young and male, and some marketing executive somewhere decided that a young, male hero (accompanied by one or more scantily clad female heroes, see *Leave Your Hormones at the Door*) was more appealing to that audience.

That may or may not be true, but the idea of a barely teen boy having the skills, dedication, and time before curfew to save the world is ridiculous. I suspect you're noticing a theme here, but the object of a role-playing game is to get the player to suspend his disbelief and immerse himself in the story. Anything that rings this blatantly false is going to make that hard for him.

Take into consideration your story when selecting the ages of your heroes. Do you want someone who is good with a sword? Then he'd better be at least old enough to have been swinging one for a few years. A battle hardened warrior? He'd better have been out of diapers long enough to have participated in a few.

Young heroes as explained by the story (and with the appropriate level of skill) are fine, if a bit on the tired side. Young heroes with masterful weapons skills and world shattering magic are not.

Use Your Head for Something Other Than a Hat Rack

Blindly following what has gone before is the bane of both commercial and armature game developers. Really think about what you're doing in your game, why you're doing it, and what purpose it serves.

Odds are that everyone, professional or not, has made a mistake when designing a game. We're only human. But we should take the time and care to make sure we don't perpetuate these mistakes into future generations of games, simply because "that's the way it's done."

Ccoa is one of three administrators at RMXP.org. Having stopped work on her project, Final Fantasy Legacy, she is working on a new original game. You can find screenshots of her progress at the Screenshot Thread on RMXP.org.

Magic Part 3

HOW MAGIC IS PERFORMED

By Near Fantastica

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), who identified many of these common features, said all magic has one of three functions: to produce, protect, or destroy.

Magicians, wizards and so on, accomplish these ends via three elements. These elements are:

(Changed to avoid potential pronoun confusion)

Spoken words:

- Spells
- Incantations
- Invocations

Enchantments (changed to preserve a uniform structure and promote easier readability, also removed an unnecessary explanation)

Actions taken:

- Rites
- Procedures
- Gestures

Use of magic tools (changed to preserve a uniform structure and promote easier readability, also removed an unnecessary explanation)

Condition of the practitioner, which requires precise, arduous preparation and might include:

- Purification by fasting
- Meditating in solitude
- Dancing
- Drumming
- Staring into flames
- Inhaling smoke
- Ingesting drugs
- Enduring pain
- Intense sweating

After ritual self-purification, the magician recites the spell, almost always accomplished by an action or rite that is intended to carry the magic to its intended object. Usually continued and unbroken attention to the proper state of mind is necessary for a magician's power to work. In higher magic, a trained imagination brought to intense concentration may be required.

Let's take a closer look at each of the elements of the magical arts.

Spells, Incantations, Invocations, Enchantments

The first element of magic is what is said. Words themselves retain a magical ability to affect us even in our enlightened era. Many people still have difficulty in separating their reactions to what the words symbolize. Cursing involves invoking the names of deities, saints, or devils: holy names or their devilish counterparts, whether in casual speech or magic spells.

The spell is associated so strongly with magic that in some primitive societies, the word for magic and the word for spell is the same. Usually a spell must be spoken exactly, without the slightest deviation from text and with proper pronunciation or intonation. Everywhere, the spoken part of a magic act is of supreme importance.

Spell books, such as the grimoire of the Middle Ages, required debilitating purification on the magician's part, extreme care in making tools and letter-perfect recitation of enormous lists of words of power, holy names and turgid prose. Among Polynesians, a single slip during the most sacred ritual might cause death of the practitioner by supernatural causes.

Spells are governed by tradition rather than creativity. Altering a spell defuses its magic. For example, Ancient Egyptian magic, *hike*, worked through spoken formulas that had to be recited exactly as proscribed at a particular place and time. Egyptians credited mispronounced words with all instances of magical failure.

The language of spells relates directly to an associated ritual and desired effect. To confer speed to a canoe, for instance, a spell cites birds on the wing, the lightness of a seagull on water, the floating ability of certain woods, and onomatopoeic words that sound like speed.

Spells use cryptic, archaic language; list of ancestral names, holy names, demon names, and spirit names; and stories of mythological events, all in precise order and pronunciation, often known only to elite group initiates. The difficulties of meeting the stringent requirements for preparation and performance were cited as reasons why magic failed to work. In one of the most moving fantasy short stories of the mid-1970s, Tom Reamy's award-winning "San Diego Lightfoot Sue," a forty-five-year-old woman falls in love with a teenage Kansas lad and wants him to see how she looked at fifteen. The daughter of a witch, she performs a rite that goes wrong. Witnesses see only a green fire that consumes her – virtually the only fantasy element in the story. The archetypal power of this stuff works even in small fictional doses. A single magical idea that spells are dangerous to the magician if not performed properly continues to inspire tales in every medium.

The need for exactness in spells and rites supplies a basis for much humor in modern fantasy with mistakes responsible for all sorts of consequences, from the humorous sort practiced by Samantha's senile aunt on TV's *bewitched*, to the gruesomely macabre. Humor, fantasy and horror often compliment each other in fiction, perhaps because our human reaction to horror and the fantastic is often nervous laughter. In fiction, certain authors always made a living combining humor and horror, and humor and fantasy. At least two twentieth-century cartoonists, Gahan Wilson and Charles Addams, never strayed far from their successful mix of the two. Film and TV scripts combine fantasy, horror, and comedy in an almost distinct genre in which the fantasy element—a genie, ghost, witch, or magician—serve entirely comical purpose (*Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, *I Dream of Genie*, *Death Becomes Her*). So don't be overly surprised if the Grim Reaper in your story turns out to have a sense of humor.

Black and White Magic

Magic in all times has served both positive and negative purposes, which are sometimes referred to as white magic and black magic. Magic itself is neutral; it is the application to which it is put that characterizes it. In the case of Christian, Islamic or other religious "black magic," official church rites are often reversed, as with (use of "as in" just didn't flow right) the black mass or saying the Lord's Prayer backwards. Necromancy—calling upon the spirits of the dead—is also characterized as black magic.

When one religion succeeds another, as Christianity did with the worship of multiple gods and goddess, the priests, wizards, or wise men/women of the former (paganism) are characterized as witches and black magicians by the new religion. (Many of the gods and goddesses became Christian saints, and pagan festivals became Catholic holy days.) Hebrew tribes worshiping their god, Yahweh (later Jehovah), did the same to the many Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian and other Middle Eastern deities, going so far as to make devils of former deities such as Baal.

The black magic of the medieval era, with its grimoires and their impossible to fulfill requirements, is generally considered silly by modern magicians. But at the same time, magicians practice various high-magic systems imported from the East, where they mix oriental ideas with those surviving from pagan times. We'll cover this in greater detail later.

Rituals, Rites and Wrongs

Nearly all spells are accompanied by actions. These rites generally require the same exactness on the performers part as the reciting of spells. The main purpose of a rite is to carry the magic of the spell to its desired object.

Rituals are ceremonial acts for religious or sacred purposes. They have various, and frequently overlapping purposes: to placate, propitiate, supplicate, honor, obey or call forth the deities, spirits or demons; to initiate passage into adulthood, entrance into a secret society or entrance into a mystical vocation such as magician or shaman (all three may be ecstatic in nature, requiring the consumption of drugs, fasting, lone to deals in he wilderness or jungle, pain, sleep deprivation and other means of altering consciousness); to mark transitions or passages; to encourage fertility, healing or cleansing; to protect home, family, children or warriors; or to banish wrongdoers.

Elements of Ritual

The elements of ritual vary according to the type of magic practiced. Those required for ritual and ceremonial magic are covered in more detail in that section. Among the common features of ritual in all magic are:

- Reciting holy names, the names of deities, spells, chants or prayers
- Dancing and other movement, particularly ritualized postures and gestures
- Costumes, masks, fetishes
- Incense, smoke, candles, fires
- Offerings, sacrifices
- Feasting or fasting
- Purifications
- Use of sacred objects, relics, tools, images, symbols

Ceremonial rituals include making the familiar magic circle, and within it, triangles of the art. Magicians must remain inside the circle or lose their protection from the entities they summon.

Meditative Magic

Meditation is an element of magic from the shamanism of primitive tribes to the most esoteric ceremonial magic. It is used to cleanse the body, mind and soul, and to connect to the creative force of the universe through altered consciousness. Meditating on the Tree of Life forms an important aspect of Kabbalah.

Some magical systems, such as Hawaiian Huna and Islamic Sufi, actually do their primary work

through meditation and associated mental activity—imagination, visualization and concentration. This might be achieved through drumming, drugs, dancing, or the deprivation of food, sleep, or company.

In Sufi practice, whirling is one way to achieve an ecstatic state in which magic of a psychic nature can be performed. Since Sufis who follow pious poverty are called dervishes, those who spin their trances are called whirling dervishes. Fantastic literature and poetry from Rumi to Arabian Nights are cited as quintessential Sufi texts. Since each Sufi adept teaches from his own system, no single Sufi approach to mysticism exists. Orders included not only the Whirling Dervishes, but also the Howling Dervishes, Shaven Dervishes and Silent Dervishes. Islamic black magic works much the same as Christian-inspired black magic; holy objects, places, garments, symbols, rituals and the Qur'an are desecrated, recited backwards or otherwise altered for dark magic purposes.

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Infection **By Cygnea**

Tom's feelings for her were like a sickness.

They were unexplainable and unreasonable, fierce and desperate, a constant, unrelenting force that left him weak and irrational.

He became flushed around her; his heart rate shot up, his mind became clouded, his limbs moved towards her—*always* towards her— without conscious thought, and pulling them back took massive amounts of willpower, was almost physically painful, and was always just the opposite of what he wanted to do.

Touching her seemed to be the only cure; kissing her, caressing her, pulling her so close and holding her so tightly that it seemed she'd either break or they'd merge into one person. He couldn't get enough of her; no kiss was deep enough, never long enough, their clothes were a constant hindrance that he learned to hate, there could never be enough of them touching, no matter where he kissed or where he moved his hands or how he wrapped her legs around him.

He loved her neck; he learned that touching it, pressing his lips or tongue to it, nipping at it, in just the right way made her as weak as she made him, forced her to fall against him and pant and twist, grab at him, voice faint, broke sentences, unable to decide whether she wanted him to stop or continue.

But just as touching her seemed to be the cure it seemed to worsen his disease as well; he thought of her constantly, couldn't stand to see another boy show the slightest interest in her, found himself longing for her touch or glance or smile or *just a sight of her*, waking up in the middle of the night after dreams about her that left him breathless and frustrated, angry at the both of them and wishing he could simply keep her around all the time, always close by his side where he needed her.

They never had enough time together; classes were useless for anything besides quick, sly touches, meaningful looks, and carefully worded phrases layered with innuendo that were missed by anyone but the two of them. He learned her schedule by heart and began catching her whenever there was a good opening; between classes, during breaks, at before and during breakfast, lunch and dinner, pulling her into empty classrooms, deserted hallways, secret passages, anywhere and every way that guaranteed them a few moments alone together.

He had little care for what others thought; while they didn't flaunt their relationship and kept it quiet, private, he had once given her his scarf, wrapped it around her neck and told her to wear it the rest of the day, taking a perverse sort of delight in the sight of Hufflepuff displaying Slytherin colors. It only deepened when he saw the way other boys glanced between them, knowing they were beaten, that any chances they made have had were now completely and utterly ruined, crushed into the dirt where they belonged, the worthless desires of people beneath her, beneath *him*.

Some illnesses have to get worse before they get better; they require the victim to stay strong, to ride out the storm, to cling to life for however long it takes before finally disappearing, having been beaten or outlasted. Others were violent and short lived; the pain was terrible, the fevers high, but after a few days they dispersed as though having never existed at all, even the memories dim and fading. A few were lasted a lifetime; unable to be cured or found they existed within the patient, either killing them slowly or doing nothing but causing inconvenience.

Tom did not know what type of sickness had hold on him or how long it would last; whether it would burn out within a year or if he'd suffer with it for the rest of his life, cursed to depend on her as his only source of respite, growing more and more dependent on her with each passing day.

He did not know and he did not care; she had infected him.

Cygnea has been a member of RMXP.org since May 6th. She is an active writer of fanfiction and you can find more of her work at her Fanfiction.net profile (<http://www.fanfiction.net/u/32818/>).

Plastic Tree of Life

By Near Fantastica

'Any fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius - and a lot of courage - to move in the opposite direction.' Brian set down his copy of *The Plastic Tree of Life* and touched his desk where it was glowing and beeping. A blue holographic projection of a young woman rose out of the desk.

"The Jackets," said the projection, "your 2pm sir."

"Yes, of course. Thank you Violet," said Brian.

He marked his page and returned the book to the shelf. The door opened behind him.

"Do come in and have a seat," said Brian "I will be right with you."

"Thank you for seeing us, sir," said Mr. Jacket.

"That is quite alright, John" said Brian, settling down in this chair. "What can I do for you today?"

Brian looked over John Jacket, a small, timid man. A banker from one of the suburban cities, today he was obviously troubled by something. Other than his transparent mood, he was no worse for wear physically. The government programs looked after people physically and financially these days. If people are happy they will be productive, and production is number one. Brian remembered the government's ads all too well. He shook off his thoughts and turned to Mrs. Jacket.

"How's the baby doing, Kate? I was wondering if you were going to try and bypass seeing me altogether," said Brian. "I trust you are aware of the new laws that are now in effect?"

Kate simply nodded and Brian continued his speech. It was the same one he gave to all new couples.

"Given the demand for production, the newborn blueprinting process has been reformatted to rebalance and reenergize the economy. As our population climbs to 10 billion, new control measures are needed, so bills have been passed classing the social structure and limiting the choices of these classes to the types of blueprints available."

"We can't all be lawyers and doctors."

"Why the hell not?" interjected John. Kate gave him a swift kick in the shin that Brian barely noticed. Brian now understood why John was so upset.

He had probably been dreading this appointment for weeks.

Brian remembered when people were so happy to come and see him. So happy that their baby would be blueprinted and grow up to be healthier, stronger, faster, and smarter. Reengineer their DNA to fulfill the wishes of the parents, who, like so many parents before them they wanted their kids to be better than everyone else. In turn that's just what was done, however that didn't last long. As the economy began to fall to pieces the government passed new bills taking over the blueprinting process and requiring new parents to register to a class. As such, blueprints in that class would be the only choices they had. People couldn't even have a child the natural way anymore.

"Bah humbug," sighed Brian. John jumped to his feet, rounded the chair and headed for the door pulling his wife behind him.

"See? I told you he wouldn't help us," John whispered. Kate broke free of her husband's grasp and turned to face Brian.

"We haven't even asked him yet, dear," whispered Kate as she returned to the seat in front of Brian's desk. It took some time for Kate to coax her husband back into his seat.

"What are we all whispering about?" whispered Brian leaning forward on his desk.

"Nothing," said Kate as she shot her husband a sour look. Brian leaned back in his chair, giving a low chuckle as a smile returned to his face.

"I am no fool you know," said Brian. Kate smiled. John sank farther into his chair.

"Of course not, sir." said Kate gently, "You must know that I... we only want the best for our child."

"Everyone does," sighed Brian "that's why the country is in the sorry state that it's in. Do you think this is the first time someone has asked me to bend the rules? Why should I do that for you? What's so special about you? Why should I risk my job, my livelihood, to help you? It's the same for everyone. You start at A and lose a letter for every genetic blemish we have to fix. In your case that's 18. Do you really want me to skimp on fixing the genes that cause cancer, aids, or the common cold just so your child can score a few points higher and become a banker like it's father? Why should I do this for you?"

John sank farther into his chair, becoming smaller by the moment. Kate simply smiled and said,

"Because you care."

Brian let out a heavy sigh and leaned back into his chair. Kate smiled at her husband who began to regain his shape and colour at the indication of the smile.

"Do...do you ever make a mistake..." inquired John, "do you ever turn an Einstein into an average Joe?"

"I am sure we do," said Brian "but does it really matter? We just blueprint another. The system is now about balance, no matter how impractical it is." (that doesn't make sense)

"Whatever happened to survival of the fittest, natural selection, and all that jazz?" interjected John.

"We destroyed nature a long time ago, John," said Kate.

"That's my point," countered John.

"I know dear," Kate returned.

"To be direct, the reason we came to see you sir was because we want you to fake the blueprinting," said Kate "to bypass it all together."

"Impossible!" bellowed Brian, "Even if it could be done, the government would string me out to dry for even talking about such a thing and the child surely would not survive outside a month. The world has changed, we have to as well, and if blueprinting is the only way, so be it!"

Before he finished Kate and John were already at the door. Kate turned and smiled, "Thank you for your time Doctor Williams," she closed the door behind her.

John and Kate waited next to the window outside of Brian's office. With a ping the window slid open and they climbed into the car that materialized outside. With another ping the window slid closed and John pulled away.

"That Williams is definitely a free thinker," said John "should I have him placed on observation and test his patients?"

"Not needed," said Kate "he wanted to help but has been conditioned not to."

"What makes you so sure?"

"If he didn't help us, he surely didn't help others," stated Kate. "Oh yes there were others. Didn't you read the file, you blockhead? He blueprinted his own son at the bottom end of the scale. A month later

his wife left him, probably furious with the classification. No doubt went to someone else to try and get the blueprint increased."

"Ok, whatever," said John "mark the file closed and schedule him for a retest in 5 years. I still say he is a free thinker." ...

After some time, Brian got to his feet and found his book just where he left it. He collapsed into his chair and put his feet up on his desk and continued to read. 'How foolish of man to create the plastic tree of life, you did so bask in its glory, but you are a coward.' Brian hurled the book across the room and sank into his chair, his head in his hands.

Near Fantastica has been a member of RMXP.org since January 29th. He has worked on several influential scripts for the RPG Maker XP engine and is currently working on his own RPG Maker program called "The Game Wizard".