# Dense Worlds, Deep Characters:
# Role-Playing Games, World Building, and Creative Writing

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## Creative Writing in the Twenty-First Century: Upgrade Required

The first decade of the 21ˢᵗ century has seen a rise in academics working in "creative writing studies," an academic discipline that explores and challenges the traditional workshop method commonly found in creative writing courses (Donnelly, 2011). While creative writing studies is growing, creative writing scholars have yet to address online tools that promote a writing culture of collaboration and mass participation. Jenkins (2009) describes *participatory culture* as "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (p. 3). While the traditional creative writing workshop focuses on craft aspects of single-authored works, instructors can use their classrooms to structure a more democratized, socially aware community of student-writers working around common interests (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013).

In addition, the institutional space provided for creative writing can provide students with life skills beyond the production of a literary short story. Jenkins (2009) identifies eleven skills that will be required for citizens in the 21st century: *play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking* and *negotiation*. Rather than focusing entirely on literary aesthetics, creative writing classrooms can be reimagined as experimental spaces that encourage students to work on projects that require collaboration and teamwork while also honing their skills with digital tools.

## Using RPGs in Fiction Writing Classes

In order to address as many of these skills as possible in my fiction writing classes, I have incorporated collaborative and team-based writing projects using a variety of games: videogames, role-playing games (RPGs), parlor games, card games and combinations of each. While much critical attention in game studies has focused on how games tell stories, it's important to remember that all kinds of games act as excellent story-generating systems (Aarseth, 2004) that can be used by instructors to encourage students to explore new directions in their writing.

In my own research using RPGs in fiction writing classes (Hergenrader, 2011; Hergenrader, 2014) I have argued that their combination of rules and aleatory elements provides an ideal balance of structure, unpredictability, and creative freedom for beginning fiction writers. Mackay (2001) describes the RPG as an episodic and participatory story-creation system that uses a set of quantified rules that help determine how characters' spontaneous interactions are resolved. For writing classes, this means the RPG invites greater amounts of engaged participation from every student. The spontaneity of the game models how stories evolve from the decisions the students' characters make, and the episodic quality of gameplay allows for natural breaks for class discussions pertaining to narrative craft. The rules provide both structure and boundaries for the players' actions. Thus this game-based methodology provides a situated and embodied learning space, which Gee (2007) argues is an ideal combination for deep learning.

Though playing RPGs in fiction writing courses has numerous benefits, it also presents significant challenges in regards to time and complexity. Teachers with little or no experience with RPGs might be unwilling to invest significant time in learning how to play them, and in-class gaming sessions present other logistical challenges, particularly in terms of having students fill the role of game master (GM). In RPGs, control over the story is distributed unequally between the GM and players (Cover, 2010; Mackay, 2001) and this can create challenges in a classroom environment. Talented GMs possess an aptitude for improvisational narrative (Hindmarch, 2008) that not all students possess in equal measure, meaning that some groups may experience a narratively rich campaign while others may not. Furthermore GMs who act dictatorially or vindictively can frustrate players and make the RPG session a hostile environment (Fine, 2002). Also, rule-based representations of characters of different races and genders can unintentionally become essentialist in nature (Voorhees, 2009) if not corrected by a conscientious GM. GMs possess knowledge not available to players (Mackay, 2001) and thus unexpected GM absences disrupt the consistency of the players' campaign. While no single challenge is insurmountable, each adds to a significant amount of managerial overhead for an already complex course structure.

Yet even without classroom play sessions, the RPG still provides an excellent model for collaborative work through the creation of an RPG-derived catalog. I have argued (Hergenrader, 2014) that RPGs allow players to assemble

highly flexible stories by selecting entries from catalogs detailing available items, locations, and characters. Catalog entries help create a coherent, rule-based world based on quantitative and qualitative information that gives the players context for how each entry might fit into their game. For example, the free *Dungeons & Dragons* module "Keep on the Shadowfell" (Wizards, 2009) describes the village of Winterhaven through a combination of quantitative and qualitative information, such as the demographic information (pop. 977) and its economy (agriculturally-based system using barter and trade) along with a map of structural features such as the locations of gates, inns, and shops. These are complemented by narrative descriptions (e.g. "the population of Winterhaven is predominantly human, with a scattering of dwarf families and a handful of individuals of other common races, including a couple elves" [p. 9]) and information about the village's most important citizens and their dispositions.

The *quantitative* portion of the entries creates internal coherence for the world and allows in-game decisions to both be consistent and informed. For example, a character with strength value of 8 is weaker than a character with a 10, but either character could lift a crate that requires a strength of 6. The *qualitative* portion gives more subjective narrative information, for example whether the lord of the village is welcoming to or suspicious of strangers. Each entry carries its own storytelling potential; when combined with other relevant catalog entries, the storytelling possibilities increase exponentially.

The following sections detail how writing instructors may guide students through the process of constructing their own world and catalog of entries through *critical world building*, and how a series of *character creation exercises* adapted from RPG resources and fiction prompts can help students develop well-rounded protagonists for their stories. Both processes rely extensively on the balance of quantitative and qualitative information found in RPG catalogs of fictional worlds.

## Critical World Building

In my RPG classes, students begin by collaboratively creating a large-scale speculative world that resembles those found in popular digital RPGs (DRPGs) like Bethesda Softworks's *Fallout 3* and *Skyrim*. Students are enthusiastic about writing in science fiction and fantasy settings, but more importantly speculative fiction writers must think deeply about how the lived experience of characters will change when the rules of a world change, either slightly or radically. McHale (1987) calls fictional worlds that break from our consensus reality as "ontologically dominant" works of fiction, or ones that privilege the experience of *being* over *knowing*. He argues that such that ontologically dominant works present philosophical questions such as: What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?

In the class student writers must come to a mutual agreement about the rules of their world, which in turn raises productive questions about the relationship between the shared fictional world they're creating and our subjective impressions of the reality we currently inhabit. While some questions about the world might be politically neutral, others are explicitly political in nature. For example, an innocuous question might be "does magic exist in your world?" whereas a more politically charged question would be "is magic equally available to men and women in your world?" The first question is one any novice writer would be expected to answer; however the second requires a good deal more unpacking to answer well.

I call this process "critical world building" (Hergenrader, 2014), which is a dialogic, recursive conversation between the instructor and students, and between students working in peer groups. It happens in four steps: *completing a world building survey*; *writing a metanarrative*; *populating a catalog*; and *plotting entries on a map*.

## World Building Survey

In a pre-course survey, my students elected to create a post-apocalyptic world. In the first week of my fiction writing course I sent them a follow-up web survey that consisted of two parts: one that answered "big questions" about the post-apocalyptic world and a second that addressed more specific social, economic, and political concerns. Both parts provide a starting point for discussions about writing the world's metanarrative. The "big questions" portion asked the following:

- How the apocalypse happened (biological warfare, nuclear war, pandemic, etc.)

- When the apocalypse happened (ancient, Renaissance, Industrial Revolution, early 20th century, present, near future, of far future)

- How long ago the apocalypse had happened (anywhere from yesterday to 100 years ago)

- Whether the world was an alternative version of our reality or an entirely new world

- The size of the this explorable world (a country, an average-sized state, large city, small city)

- The geographic features present (coastline, desert, forest, mountains, etc.)

- The season (winter, spring, summer, or fall)

The questions were quantitative, i.e. radio buttons and sliders as opposed to short answers. Such questions provide a general framework for the fictional world and also stimulate thinking about how answers might combine in interesting ways. For example, a world where a disease wiped out most of the population one year earlier will be quite different than a world 100 years after a nuclear holocaust. Beginning writers often fail to think about geography and season when starting a new story, yet shelter and travel are dramatically impacted based on the weather, and frigid winter and hot summers present unique challenges for characters, especially those living in a world with limited infrastructure.

The second and longer section was entitled "tricky social questions" and laid the groundwork for critical classroom discussions. Each features a rating scale of 1 to 5 and covered the following:

- Gender relations (from strongly matriarchal to strongly patriarchal with 3 being gender equality)

- Economic strength (from depression and scarcity to a booming economy)

- Economic distribution (from near total equality to extreme inequality)

- Race relations (from little tension between races to extreme levels of tension between races)

- Sexual orientations (from complete acceptance to zero tolerance of non-heteronormativity)

- Population size (from small (25k people) to very large (1.5 million+))

- Law and justice (from complete anarchy to robust system of laws, policing, courts, and jail)

- Political infrastructure (from "war of all against all" to strong democracy and free elections)

- Healthcare and education (from virtually nonexistent to widely available to all)

- Religious influence (from nonexistent to religion being central to all aspects of daily life)

The questions are intended both be value-neutral and though-provoking. For example, a world with a strong economy but high inequality could either be primed for a popular revolution against those in power, or it could be fragmented with gang factions fighting in the streets over scarce goods. Either option could provide a rich backdrop for storytelling.

## Discussion, Debate, and Writing the Metanarrative

As we discussed the survey results in class, I asked students to answer the questions for our *actual* world. For example, I asked students where they thought our society is in terms of gender equity. While no one suggested we have a matriarchal society, some (usually young men) suggested we're somewhere between equality and slight patriarchy. Predictably, other students (usually young women) took exception to that, and as instructor I moderated the conversation as necessary, keeping discourse civil while suggesting questions students perhaps hadn't thought of themselves, such as, "What does it mean for a society to be *slightly* patriarchal?" When the class reached some consensus, or when I called time, the question turned back to how the issue should be handled in the fictional world and the conversation continued. I repeated the process for all 10 questions, a process that took several class periods.

The final decisions needed be narrativized for the qualitative portion of the process, which proved to be an interesting writing challenge for students, especially when they opted for pat answers. For example, if a class decides that the post-apocalyptic world has reached perfect gender equality, the logical question is, "How did that happen?" Such questioning across all categories prevents the speculative world from becoming mere escapist wish fulfillment and requires the authors to think hard about how social, political, and economic realities come to pass, and then express that in the form of a narrative. This is what Mayers (2004) calls "craft criticism," or situating the act of creative writing within specific institutional, political, social and economic contexts. The quantitative

answers from the survey help pose these "tricky questions" and the qualitative narrative descriptions attempt to answer them.

During this process, appointed note takers recorded class decisions and posted them to the course wiki. Wikis have the advantage of being editable by any authorized user and each page features change logs and discussion threads. This prevents users from deleting content anonymously and also allows them to carry on conversations after class. I reserved class time for students to work in small groups and encouraged groups to consult with each other as they wrote. For example, the students working on the world's economic system were in constant discussion with the group writing about governmental structures. As instructor, I remained actively involved to steer any content away from genre clichés or essentialist depictions of groups of people, and I also prompted students to create new categories as they saw fit. For example, I encouraged them to begin adding professions and political factions once the economy and governmental structures had been better fleshed out.

In a matter of a few weeks, the students produced roughly 8000 words or over 30 pages of collaboratively written metanarrative. While some students contributed more than others (which I tracked and assessed via the wiki page histories) no one could claim sole authorship for the work, since all parts of the world were inextricably linked to the others. Furthermore, students developed deep interests in certain aspects of the world and wanted to start filling in the narrative with more concrete details, which lead to the next phase: populating the catalog.

## Populating the Catalog with Items, Locations, and Characters

Students determined what attributes were necessary for each of three entry types—items, locations, and characters—and how catalog entries should be quantified and qualified. I steered them toward comparative, rather than numeric, terms to increase an entry's interpretive possibilities and resist essentialist claims (Arjoranta, 2011). For example, rather than a crate requiring a strength of 6 to lift, it could be defined as being "very heavy." As long as entries use the terminology consistently—both an encyclopedia and grand piano cannot both be described as "very heavy"—then the descriptors can suggest more fluid, interpretive relationships. A "very strong" person might be able to lift a "very heavy" object, but a "weak" one could not; for a "strong" person it would be a spontaneous judgment call.

Once the class reached an agreement about how catalog entries should be quantified and qualified, the world built out very quickly. I took the requirements for each type of entry and created a page template to ensure entries were completed consistently. For example, every item required a weight, value, and rarity—expressed either numerically or descriptively—and a brief narrative that gave it some context for how it is used in the world. Assigning students even a modest number of entries results in a very dense world. If every student creates only 5 locations and characters, in a 25-student class the catalog will have 125 unique locations and characters available to them for fiction writing, all in a matter of a few weeks.

## Plotting Entries on a Map

The world building survey establishes whether the catalog will be contained in a geographically small but dense urban area (e.g. Manhattan, Tokyo) or spread across an entire region like southern California. The density of entries on the map will also impact the narrative: Do characters have to travel 30 miles to see their neighbor, or simply walk down the hall? How might that shape character interactions? My first class chose the greater Milwaukee area, and the second chose the region of southeastern Wisconsin.

Using markers in Google Maps results in a map very similar to the ones found in DRPGs like Bethesda's *Fallout 3* or *Skyrim*. Figure 1 shows a close up of more than a dozen map markers—some of which are locations and some are characters—in post-apocalyptic Madison. Note that the marker description contains a link to wiki entry so users can easily move between the map and wiki.
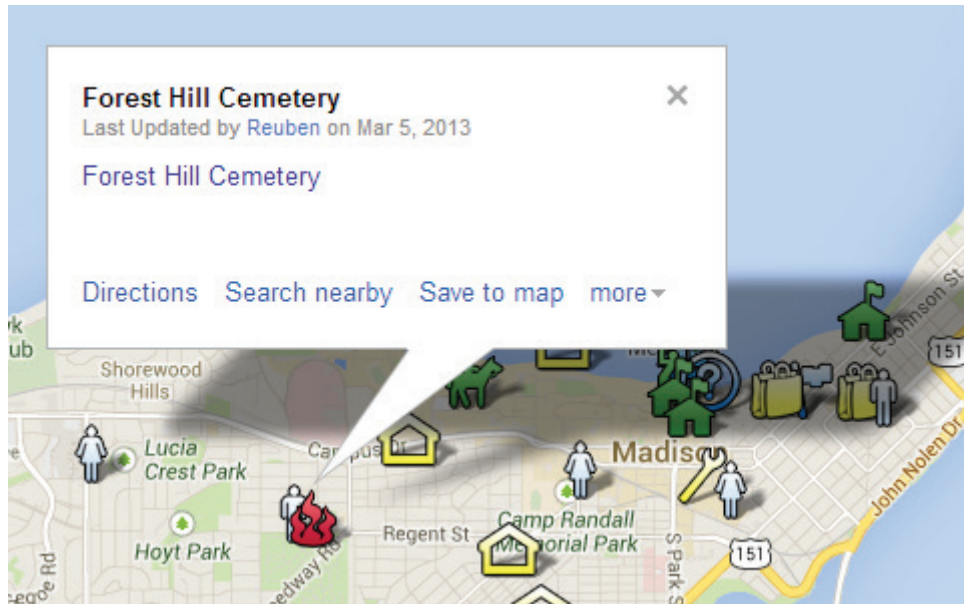
**Figure 1. Map Markers in Post-Apocalyptic Downtown Madison in Google Maps.**

Students also gain a better spatial and temporal relationship between locations and characters through plotting locations on an actual place. Mapping also encourages them use monuments and other culturally significant spaces in their fiction in meaningful ways, something that videogames already do with success (Bogost, 2011). The map portion can also be layered over the city where the students reside, giving them incentive to reimagine and explore their own communities through the lens of a fictionalized world.

## Character Creation Exercises

With the completion of the critical world building portion of the course, the students should have a firm understanding of the multifaceted, complex world that will serve as an integral and active backdrop for their fiction. However good stories need emotionally well-rounded characters too, lest the characters wind up feeling more like a "conglomeration of stats and types rather than the richly complex character that is the stuff of literature" (Martin, 2011), a problem that can plague bland or generic DRPG characters.

Tabletop RPG players often create elaborate identities for their player-characters (PCs) and write stories about them that take place before, during, and after game sessions (Bowman, 2010; Cover 2010). For my fiction writing courses, I have adopted the term "perspective characters" to describe the personalities the players assume when writing their fictions, and I refer to them using the same abbreviation (PC).

First off, PCs should have at a minimum the same statistical categories as the wiki entries to ensure consistency across all characters in the catalog. Instructors will want to closely monitor the creation of PCs so students' characters have weaknesses as well as strengths and do not become larger than life superheroes. Aleatory techniques can also be used, such as dice rolls to determine numeric statistics, or students can balance any of their characters' above average attributes with below average ones.

Secondly, as an in-class activity, I ask a series of quantitative and qualitative questions inspired by creative writing textbooks (Bernays & Painter 2010) and RPG character prompts (Bowie, 2013). This begins with their PC's "driver's license" and "tax return" information—height, weight, eye color, race, gender, occupation, level of education, economic class, current living situation, etc. They then include more personal details such as tattoos, style of dress, or other distinguishing features. In summary fashion, I ask them how a stranger at a bus stop might describe the PC at a glance in 1-3 sentences.

Next we move to broader, evaluative questions. In 3-4 sentences, I ask them to describe their character's home life growing up and their attitude toward education; then I ask for 3-4 sentences on the character's social network, their attitudes toward the opposite sex, and their short and long term life goals.

Then we move into a series of quantitative aspects. I ask them to review a list of dispositions (Angry, Anxious, Apathetic, Ashamed, Calm, Contemptuous, Curious, Excited, Joyful, Melancholy) and choose the top two that best represent the character. I encourage them to offer any alternatives as well. Then I ask them to rank their

characters' following attributes on a scale of 0 to 100:

- *Outlook* – from pessimistic (0) to optimistic (100)

- *Integrity* – from unscrupulous (0) to conscientious (100)

- *Impulsiveness* – from spontaneous (0) to controlled (100)

- *Boldness* – from cowardly (0) to daring (100)

- *Flexibility* – from stubborn (0) to adaptable (100)

- *Affinity* – from cold/aloof (0) to warm/hospitable (100)

- *Comportment* – from gruff/antisocial (0) to charming (100)

- *Interactivity* – from reserved/loner (0) to engaging/outgoing (100)

- *Disclosure* – from secretive (0) to candid (100)

- *Conformity* – from conservative/orthodox (0) to heterodox/shocking (100)

I then have them give five-word catch-phrase answers for their character's opinion on religion, general political views, sex and sexual relations, war and violence, drugs and alcohol, and the government.

The next section asks them to select their characters' two primary motivations and assign them values between 1 and 99 than cannot exceed 100: Achievement, Acquisition, Balance, Beneficence, Chaos, Competition, Creation, Destruction, Discovery/Adventure, Domesticity, Education, Enslavement, Hedonism, Liberation, Nobility/Honor, Order. Play, Power, Recognition, Rebellion, Service, Torment, Tranquility, and Understanding. They are also free to suggest other motivations not listed.

The final section is a series of 24 questions I ask in 24 minutes, or one minute per question. They range from "what is your PC's greatest fear?" to "what's your PC's idea of a perfect date?" to "what animal would your PC be and why?" The full list can be found on my website <trenthergenrader.com/worldbuilding>.

The PC customization process can be completed in one class session. The time limit forces spontaneous thinking similar to that required during an RPG session. To mix things up, I also chose certain attributes for students' PCs. For example, in my post-apocalyptic class I had 70% of their PCs living in crushing poverty, which dramatically altered their relationship to the minority of wealthier characters.

## Creative Play in the Critical Space

At the end of the process the class will have a sprawling, collaboratively built world complete with a detailed history plotted onto a map, and each student will have a unique PC. The entire process can be completed in about six weeks, based on three hours of class time per week. While students typically develop plenty of story ideas in this time, instructors can also add in more game variations like:

- Choose at random two characters, an item, and a location for each PC and have students write a story that prominently features each entry.

- Choose two locations and have the PC travel between them, describing what he or she experiences along the way.

- Ask PCs to give a detailed, personalized history of a specific location on the map.

Many students familiar with genre fiction will attempt to have their stories match the epic scale of the world they've created, but I strongly suggest they instead focus on the human experience of their PCs in smaller story arcs— stories that happen in afternoons rather than over lifetimes or generations. Through drafts and revisions, I remind them to think about their PCs' unique subject positions in this world and how that might impact their narratives.

Such a project is intensely collaborative yet allows students to pursue their own interests while foregrounding Jenkins's (2009) 21st century skills. The RPG-inspired quantitative and qualitative aspects make the process unpredictable and fun, yet also ensures consistency. Students not only learn about fundamental aspects of narrative but they also develop essential technical and life skills as well.

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