On changing the rules of play

Game designer, musician, and writer Geoffrey Cullop on how to craft your inner character, cultivate your table, collaborate with an open mind, and be the Dungeon Master you wish to see in the world.

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As told to Meredith Graves, 3293 words.

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What game made you want to start making games?

It starts with *Dungeons & Dragons*. I would say most folks who are in this space probably start with *Dungeons & Dragons*. There are probably some outliers, too, but it starts with *Dungeons & Dragons*, with being a dungeon master, a game master. Then, making a transition from using the stuff that they sell you, to using the stuff that they sell you in bits and pieces, but hacking it up and building some Frankenstein's monster of your own creation, to, "I don't need to buy anything that they're selling me, I can write my own thing," to, "Oh, other people might also enjoy running the thing that I've written." So it's been this long transition from point A to point B with *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Black Hack by David Black, which is what I'm using for the bones for *Ancient Undead Spider Wizard*, is awesome, very condensed and to the point and simplistic. There's not a lot of purple prose or verbose word usage there. It just gets to the point. There's a game called *Troika* from a man named Dan Sell in England—*Troika* doesn't give you any lore or setting or any narrative to grab onto, but it hides all of those bits in the actual game text and rules, so that when you read a rule, or you read something that you're supposed to use in the game, it creates this flavor or feeling in your mind.

But then there's this creator down in Louisiana named Nate Treme, and he runs Highland Paranormal Society. It was the first thing that I saw and thought, "I have to do something like this." He made this pamphlet called "Temple of the Bat Demon," or "Temple of the Bat Serpent," or something like that. It was just wild. All of these random rollable tables, and it was all folded in this one piece of paper—folded, trifold.

I saw it on Twitter and said, "That's awesome. Why isn't everything for gaming that simple? Why can't we just be making flyers and pamphlets, and little one-pieces of paper?" That's where *One Page Dungeons* came from and all of this.

I know in the world of role-playing games, people spend a lot of time thinking about the constituent elements of their character, who they are and who they want to be. You already kind of answered this question on a technical level, but personally, how did you start to create or level up your character as you made the transition from player to designer?

Maybe table-top role-playing games are unique as an artistic medium in that all players are also creators, at least a little bit. Whenever you sit, even if you're a player in a game showing up with no prep, and you just expect to be in a story with someone who's done a bunch of prep, and maybe you don't even know the rules, you're just showing up because you're going with your friend—at some point you're still going to have to take the reins and start making decisions about, like you say, who your character is. Am I someone who's brave? Am I someone

who’s a coward? Am I someone who is forthright or am I someone who’s sneaky? These small decisions make you a creator while you play.

I’m kind of dodging your question a little bit by saying that I was always a creator. That’s what I always found fascinating about these games anyhow, was the creation part of it. So becoming a Creator, a capital C creator, was leaning into the bits that I found fun about playing pretend with my friends, and realizing that I don’t get a kick out of, like some people do, doing all of the math to figure out exactly how I want to kit out my level 12 wizard, or whatever. Instead, I like to think up all the scenarios and the plot twists and the sort of little hidden secrets that every character in this imaginary city is hiding. Creating the background for a character was not as exciting as going to my dungeon master journal and creating the backgrounds for an entire city or an entire world, which wasn’t as exciting as trying to see if I could do that in a way that other people would find useful enough that they would want to use something I had written in their own game.

It’s a scary transition. At one point, I think I made some comment on somebody’s Twitter post about, “You know, one day I think that I could be a game designer. Like I think it would be cool to be a game designer.” The response I got—and this is a response that you’ll get a lot if you say this sort of thing in that sphere—is, “You already are.” You’ve created a dungeon or you’ve created a map or a world or a character or something, you’ve designed that thing. As long as you don’t keep it to yourself whenever you share it with someone else, then you’re a creator. That’s all it takes. So it’s scary, but it was kind of natural.

***Ancient Undead Spider Wizard* is both a game and your first solo release as a musician. Maybe there’s something to be said here for how these two disciplines inform each other, and how they can each make you feel self-sufficient.**

A really good game session can kind of feel like an extended improv section of some jam session. If you’re having a good game session, then you don’t know what exactly is going to happen. The rules act as your time and meter and key, and then, if you can fit it in the key or the meter, then let’s have fun with it. If you want to get super jazz with it, then maybe break some rules and don’t fit it in the meter or the key. Just come back to us eventually.

So, yeah, there’s definitely a cross-over there that shares this same brain space, this improvising, creative space where you’re in a flow state of imagination and creativity while you’re doing the thing. And when you’re not doing the thing, you’re thinking about the thing, like, “Okay, I’ll practice my scales,” or, “I will go, I’ll write down a rollable table to figure out, you know, if we get stuck some place, something fun will happen when I roll the die here.” Your practice or your rehearsal would be your writing in your gaming.

But then the event itself… I get the same butterflies in my stomach, even if I’m just dungeon mastering or game mastering for some friends, that I remember getting before a performance that I was really excited about. It’s the same thing of, “I don’t know what’s going to happen. People are going to be looking to me to entertain them, so I better just go with the flow and get in that space where I can create while we’re doing the thing,” whether it’s music or gaming.

Drawing that correlation there, between tabletop gaming and jazz improvisation, it seems like both require a lot of active listening on behalf of the participants. I know that in music, but how much of a good game is active listening?

It’s very important for a good game. If you want your games to be really, truly great and good and fun, then it’s important to cultivate your table. You get the garden you tend. If you want folks who are engaged and listening, then you want to cultivate that in your table. You want to be engaged and listening whenever other people are speaking. You also want to make sure that the folks more engaged in listening are the ones that get the invites over and over again. But they’re the ones that are probably more likely to show up for your game than not.

I set that all up at the outset, though, to say that I would love for every player to be an active, engaged listener and in this jazz improv mode at the table. But that’s just not going to happen a lot of times, and that’s fine too. People are bringing different things and different expectations to the table, and if you just want to drink a couple of beers and make a couple of Monty Python jokes and let other people be the ones that are

doing the heavy lifting on engaged listening, you're still welcome at my table. Just make me laugh every once in a while or, when it's your turn, at least pretend like you're happy to be there and that you want to spend the effort. But not everybody into a gaming table is going to be as into it as a three-piece jazz band, everybody looking at each other, trying to figure out what's going on. And that's okay, I guess is what I'm trying to say.

At the end of the day, as seriously as we take these things, as we start to look at RPGs as art and as RPG creators as artists, and we start to get real self-important, sort of, with this, it's important to do the critique. It's important to look at what you're putting out into the world and to decide if it has merit and what are the merits, but at the end of the day, we're playing a game. If somebody comes for the game and you're there for the art, it's important to be able to compartmentalize some of that stuff and realize that the person who just came to play the game isn't wrong or a bad person. They're just here for a different reason than you are. It's important to me to be able to facilitate that for other players, especially if I'm running the table. I want to make sure that I can get a read on what people's expectations are and then try to fulfill those expectations for them.

You're also passionate about inclusion within the gaming community, like SWORD DREAM, and also charity.

That's such an important topic. It's not a difficult topic, but it can be rough because, yeah, there's a reputation for gamers, and it's a hard-earned reputation, unfortunately, of gate-keeping in this world of gaming. I think that that kills what this hobby and this industry, really, could be.

Without getting into the micro politics of it all, there's this thing called the OSR, the Old School Renaissance, and it's got a bad reputation for hosting fasch-y types and people we would rather not have invade our spaces, basically. The SWORD DREAM folks were the people who liked what OSR brought in the books and in your imagination, but not necessarily in the community. "I feel like my design philosophy is OSR, but I don't want to associate with these Nazis," basically.

So SWORD DREAM was born. It is not really a club. It's like a mindset, and if you want to hold forth these principles then you can be a dreamer too. There's some things about design style in there too, you know, you're looking for an old-school flavor, you're looking for kind of DIY inspired stuff. SWORDDREAM is actually a backronym: Second Wave Of Role Play Design, so that's SWORD, DREAM is DIY Rules Everything Around Me.

As far as charity, Free Dungeon Fridays was something I started for a charity I'm involved in called West Virginia FOX Hero. It's an Extra Life charity—Extra Life raises money for children's hospitals by playing games. We play table-top games, board games, role-playing games, and we raise money for Cincinnati Children's Hospital where my friend Maxwell Jackson goes to see his doctors. He has FOXG1 syndrome. Free Dungeon Friday came out of West Virginia FOX, trying to get some support for that charity. And Free Dungeon Fridays actually turned into my first big project, One Page Dungeons, when I realized how popular those were from the charity standpoint.

In terms of getting the garden you tend and building your table the way you want, with these groups and also more specific collaborators like The Acid Lich, who designed the cover for *Ancient Undead Spider Wizard*—it seems you place a high premium on keeping an open mind.

Yes. That's important. I mean I'm going to be honest with you, I have thought about some of the concepts we might discuss today, and one of the things I think is super important is: collaborating with others, with the understanding that what they do is going to be different from what is inside of your head, and that that is good. It's good that what people do is not what you expected them to do, because if they did exactly what you expected them to do, then you're going to be missing a whole other sphere of possibilities.

I'd rather give my collaborator a feeling for what it is that I'm looking for, the sensory hook of, "It's a skeleton in robes with crystals and books, and spiders are involved," and then just trust. It's trust. You trust that other artist to do their thing. And if you try to put a cage around what that other artist is doing, then it no longer becomes their thing, and they're not working on their thing anymore, they're working on your thing now, and so it's not going to be as good because they're not going to be as excited to work on it. It's probably going to come in late because they're going to be second-guessing everything that they do from now on.

The first thing you should do, probably, is take some inventory of, what about this piece of art makes me want to say, “No, this isn’t what I had in my head,” and tell the artist that. Sit with that for a second. If it’s just that, “Well, it’s not what I had in my head,” and there’s nothing specifically wrong with the art, well then, the next thing to ask myself is, “Am I a fan of this work? If I hadn’t asked for this work to be made, am I a fan of it still?” And try to look at it through those lenses. If I’m still a fan, then my email back to the collaborator is, “This rocks and I can’t wait to see the finished product,” or, “This rocks and the only thing that we can’t use is this thing, but if you change that just a little bit then we can use it.”

That’s really my process with collaborators, to let them do the things they’re good at. Stand back and just be happy that they are allowing you to share in that genius that they have.

How important is the process of play to the process of what can also be seen as really serious creative development?

That’s what’s fun about these games. Anybody can sit down and play a video game, but you’re going to bounce up against walls that are there because the technology is limited. Well, the human brain is not limited in that way. Our imagination has no boundary. You sit down and you are allowed to, and you are expected to, and you are rewarded as a player when you break the rules and go, “Let’s go talk to some random bartender across the city that our DM has no clue who they are,” and they’re going to have to make up a name and a backstory and all this stuff.

I guess, getting back to the point, it’s like that with collaborators. Just like at the table. You have to learn, as a young game organizer, to not get disappointed or sad when the more free-spirited player on your table just starts murdering your favorite NPC creations. Maybe that’s not a habit that you want to cultivate in your garden, that people just go on murder sprees, but at the same time, you should be able to deal with it in ways other than, “Well, that’s just not what happens.” That’s sort of the unwritten rule of the game, is that as a game master, I should never say, “Oh, well, no, no, that’s not what happens.” I should be saying, “Yes, and,” or, “Yes, but,” and including the thing and then bringing consequences. “Okay. So you’re going to go out on this horrific spree of violence,” and maybe that has in-world consequences that I can bring to fruition that will either dissuade you from doing that or not. Then if the behavior itself is problematic, then that’s something that needs to be addressed on an interpersonal level. But that kind of leaves the metaphor for a bit.

Instead, I guess, what the metaphor really is, and I’m kind of getting tripped up over my own words, but the metaphor is that we’re all sort of sitting at this large gaming table and nobody knows what they’re doing, in life. Life is this big gaming table, and we look to somebody who’s supposed to be in charge and ask for some guidance, and even the person in charge doesn’t know what in the world is going to happen. We’re all kind of making it up as we go along, so we might as well have fun with it and try to create interesting stories with our actions as opposed to dull ones that have been told a thousand times.

How do you get people to interpolate play into their lives, or what is its importance? How can people introduce more of a spirit of playfulness into their lives and into their art?

It’s so hard on those levels. I was scared to death to put the music video out and to have people watch it. And people seem to like it, so it’s okay now. But at the time, it really was difficult. I don’t have a good answer for that because I deal with a lot of anxiety in myself. I work with and around my anxiety issues so that I don’t let them ruin my sense of play, I guess. But there’s also something fun about that anxiety a little bit, I guess, like the butterflies in the stomach before your big performance or before your big game, or before some important thing that you have to do. If you lean into that and you think about that as being a fight or flight response and say, “Okay, I’m going to stand here and fight, I want to see what happens,” then you are often rewarded.

So I guess that what I will say is that I have been often rewarded for those moments of play in my life, of those moments of taking a chance, of rolling the dice, of seeing what will happen. I’ve gotten a lot of rewards out of that. Although I’m dealing with not wanting to do that at some level deep within my subconscious, I have practiced and trained myself to try to overcome that because I know, or at least I think and I’ve been shown, that typically things will work out at least okay, and sometimes really, really great. So that makes it more fun,

but still scary as hell. It’s a balancing act. Whenever you’re feeling brave, be brave. And when you’re not feeling brave, wait until you’re feeling more brave and be brave then.

Geoffrey Cullop Recommends:

Highland Paranormal Society

Sword Queen Games

Spear Witch

Name
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Vocation
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