

On making your own rules



Game developers Tanya DePass and B. Dave Walters discuss empowering your audience, not worrying about mistakes, honest collaboration, and creating games that aren't defined by standard sci-fi and fantasy tropes.

June 8, 2021 -

As told to Resham Mantri, 3440 words.

Tags: [Games](#), [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#), [Independence](#), [Process](#).

How do you approach game development? How do you think about audience when you're developing a game? For instance, how is *Into The Mother Land* coming together?

Tanya DePass: We're in that space where people are interacting with the game by watching us play it every week, and they're getting to watch it develop in real time, but they're also going to get a book in their hand eventually where they can go make their own adventures. So they've already gotten a taste of what the world is like before they even see this book and get a chance to play it.

With [*Into The Mother Land*], and any other games that B. Dave and I are on, we're playing the game and we're telling the story we want to tell. If the audience gets it, great, but I don't think you can ever be focused solely on audience response. Am I trying to reach a certain demographic in terms of ethnicity or orientation or anything else, or am I just thinking, "I want to put out a good product, and whoever gets it gets it"? So many people get stuck on, "Well, Black people, brown people made these products," therefore it's going to always get shelved with a Black section in books or games or TV, or people may see it and see all these brown and Black faces behind the scenes and think, "I can't touch that."

B. Dave and I are also sitting down and going, "As Black people in this industry, as Black people that have created and make our living doing content creation, what's missing that we can then give people?" Or, we're asking, "What's in there that we want to take away that would improve development?," because so many games have slavery, colonialism, all of that kind of baked into it. We took those things out, which was easier than we expected, but it was still difficult. It was still difficult because we, as Americans of a certain age, Black folks in the US having just lived through four years of a terrible presidency and all the things that we lived growing up, we've still got that in the back of our mind having grown up in this world and in this country.

B. Dave Walters: I think the extent to which the audience was a concern was we're trying to create the game that we wish we'd been able to play, and tell the stories that we wish we'd been told, to be able to portray people of color as strong and independent and intrinsically valid on their own, that the driving force behind a narrative or drama or conflict doesn't have to be expansionist breed and racism.

Players can make choices within a world or larger story that you guys have created, is that right?

B. Dave: Yeah. So this is table top game, it's not a video game. For people that aren't familiar with the medium, it is like collaborative improv basically. It's like acting with rules. So what we're designing is a campaign in a setting; it's the backdrop for your adventures is essentially what this is going to be.

Tanya: And their actions, like in real life, will have consequences for the characters. You know basically, if you've ever done an improv class, instead of someone standing on stage and telling you what to do, you're all at a table in real life or virtually. And in our case we'd say a storyteller instead of a dungeon master or game master and they are driving the narrative, but at the end of the day the rolls of the dice and your decisions still decide your outcome.

What was it like creating consequences for the characters in your game world outside of the way we think of American consequences within a largely carceral state that glorifies punishment?

B. Dave: For the most part all the collaborators were rowing in the same direction from the beginning to be able to create something new and beautiful that doesn't have to be defined by the standard sci-fi and fantasy tropes. It's a science fiction game, but of course, Dungeons and Dragons is the paragon in the marketplace and so that's what everything is going to be compared to, even if it has nothing to do with that. So I think if anything, there's definitely times that we were like, "We want to get across that this is not D & D."

To give you an example, which again, D & D is a game we both love, we both participate in it at a very high level, but this just isn't that. You have your race and your class in D & D. You're an Elfin Paladin, you're a Dwarf Cleric. In this, we went with cultures to reflect that it's not necessarily what you're born as, it's just the community that you're a part of is defining for you. We went with professions instead of classes. We built the mechanical system around skills and values. It is not that you're born bigger and stronger or smarter or dumber, it's like this is what you have consciously cultivated these capabilities and this is what's important to you, and that is what guides your journey through here.

Tanya: Yeah, so basically if you learn and apply yourself and do things that you want to do, what catches your interest, you can do that instead of being pigeonholed. You know, we keep going back to D & D, but one example is I played a Paladin and until the most current edition of D & D, Paladins had to be lawful good. They had to be the knight in shining armor literally, and now with the new edition they're not stuck being lawful good, and that was something that appealed to me. And now the character I play in Mother Lands is the opposite of what we even set the Hyenoles to be. You know, they're the scholars, they're smart, they're the ones that have come up with all the technology and inventions, but she's like, "No, I want to go fight."

What have you learned to be useful in collaborating or building a team of people?

B. Dave: I will say one thing that we very much underline with all of our creators too, was to honor their own culture and heritage if they wanted to. We have one of our contributors, Jasmine Bhullar, is Indian, so it was like draw heavily on the elements of Indian society that you feel are beautiful and bring them in your society. We had another creator who was Persian and I was like, "Look man, a lot of times, especially in recent years, Muslim culture and Arab culture is synonymous with terrorism and barbarism." I was like, "Show the beautiful size. Show the library of Baghdad. Show all of that reflected in your culture that you're trying to do." That each individual one, they're like individual love letters, not just to real people and places but even the fantastical elements.

Like we have one of our cultures is called the Solanci, they're like human plant hybrids. And it's this very integrated ecological society, because the person that came up with that idea was very important to them. We have the Hyaenole, which are these hyena-ed type people that we did on purpose, that they look like these monstrous killers but they're the philosophers. You know, they're the thinkers that you look at them and you expect one thing and they're something completely different, which as POC we live kind of daily. So, that was also baked into the fabric of it from the very beginning.

Tanya: Yeah, and in terms of learning to work with other creators, it's always being authentic, coming to people and going, "Hey, I like what you do. I think what you do is dope. I'd love to collaborate," versus the social climbing that I'm sure all of us have seen where it's like, "Oh, I see your star is on the rise, I want to hitch up to what you're doing." You know, I like what you're doing, this is what I can bring to the table, if you've got time let's collaborate. If you don't have time now, maybe at least let's chat.

And this is going to sound terrible, I'm sure people will be in their feelings, but not doing the, "Let me talk to you and buy you a coffee," equivalent, which now is like, "Let's get on a Zoom call for 30 minutes and talk your ear off, and then I basically want to chew your brain for ideas and never talk to you again." Because collaboration isn't a one and done deal.

Back in the day when we'd go to conferences, there'd be so many of those, "Oh, let me buy you a coffee, let me do whatever," and then this person would just kind of sit there and pick your brain, ask about your process, and you'd never hear from them again. So it's being willing to put in the work to keep a connection, build an authentic connection, and then go from there. So like let's say five years down the road if this is all still going and we go, "Hey, we're in season 20 of this show, or we're going to put out the fifth supplement or the fifth book, or the second edition. That person I talked to a couple of years ago that was really interested and maybe they had a skill set we couldn't use then," but if they've got time I can go, "Hey, you remember that conversation we had? This is what we're going to do. Are you still interested?"

So don't be that fair-weather friend. Be an honest collaborator. Get to know someone, see what it is they do and what you like about them. And forging a real bond is going to go way further than the occasional, "Oh, congrats," like you know when people get something and then everybody's in their DMs, "Oh, how'd you do that? How'd you do that? Who do I talk to," but there's no public congratulation. There's no public, "Oh, I'm excited for you, that's really dope." And those are the things where it's going to come out, and people talk. People don't seem to realize, especially on the RPG side the world is very small. So if you're that kind of person, folks probably already know before you even make contact.

What has gaming meant to you? What have you brought to the world of gaming that did not previously exist?

Tanya: I mean, for me gaming, content creation, because I've been doing Twitch streaming going on seven years, this is the fourth year I've been a Twitch partner, and what it brought to me and especially with the year and a half of being locked in basically, is a way to keep in contact with folks, keep doing content, keep doing fun stuff. Because all the projects I'm doing, if we weren't in a lockdown, if there wasn't a pandemic, not that I want to be like, "Oh look, pandemic got me all this stuff," I wouldn't have been home enough to sit down and participate in these things.

Because normally I travel a lot. I either go to clients or go to Cons. All the things that we're all bemoaning the loss of, I was traveling two to three times a month, so there was no way I could have sat down and dedicated every Thursday to Black Guy Society, or every Sunday or Wednesday to Mother Lands, or even have Mother Lands be a thing I would have time to create and work on. So that's what it's brought to me, at least in the last couple of years.

And then I think what we both brought to it is that cold splash of water that a lot of people need about representation, and that reminding people that we're here, we're not new, we didn't spring up out of the internet because D & D is suddenly popular or RPGs are suddenly popular, that we've been here. People like Pondsmith have been here. You know, folks that have been doing the work that you just didn't see because people just flat out don't value black and brown creatives. They don't acknowledge black, brown, queer, disabled, neuro divergent creators, unless we can be their tragedy of the week.

We can tell a happy and joyous story. Yes, things get serious on Mother Lands but we often laugh more than not every week. So we can tell a happy, joyous story without it turning into tragedy porn, you know?

B. Dave: Yeah, because black joy is a valid form of protest.

So, that's been great. Yeah, it's literally taken me around the world. It's introduced me to people who've become dear friends. It's opportunities to just go get lost in a story, and especially here during a time in which the whole world has needed an outlet and a distraction, to be able to not just find it for myself but be able to provide it to other people. I heard a quote fairly early on in the pandemic that I'm paraphrasing now, but that it basically said just remember after you reread your favorite book for the fifth time and finish binge watching your favorite TV show for the 12th time, remember that in our darkest hour we turn to artists.

And there's been an entire other level of pressure in the last year to 15 months that is unprecedented in human history, and so being able to come in and just kind of turn the release valve a little bit for people at least for a couple of hours to take their mind off of that has been a gift that I've really been happy to be able to participate in.

You know, that's why we do it. That's why we do it. And that's the point of the game, of what we're doing now with this project, is empowering people to take that and do that for their selves and their friends and around their table, and tell their own stories and to be able to laugh and cry together.

How do you keep the flexibility to make mistakes and learn through that process? For some people this is where the creative process lies, in making mistakes, learning through them. It's not just landing at this end product with this beautiful thing, but also acknowledging process.

B. Dave: I'd say honestly, you can't really make mistakes. It's just all content, you know? And you laugh at it, roll with it. If it's a mechanical mistake you can attempt to clarify it later. If it's not a mechanical mistake, then it just adds to the narrative and just keep going. I realize a lot of times people get shy or self conscious and I'm like, a lot of times if you make a mistake, and this is true just in life, unless you stop like, "Oh, no. Shoot," people don't know. Just keep rolling with it. Keep rolling with it.

Tanya: Yeah, and also there's a mistake, because there can be times when we make a mistake and nobody would know because the advantage is it's all brand new. If we make a mistake, who's going to know? We're making the rules, we're making up as we go along. But there are always, and even with a brand new system, a brand new world that we built, we discovered there are still people that will try to back seat and tell you you're doing it wrong. And I'm just like, "You really sat here and told a whole bunch of Black and brown folks that we're creating our own world wrong."

B. Dave: But it is just like, "Pull up a seat. We're going to go to church." And that's always tough, man. That's always tough. You know, you've got to be sensitive about talking down to people or even being perceived as doing such in general, but again, when you start trying to tell people that they're wrong about their own life experience, yeah, that's rough. Especially when we approach it as no colonialism and POC focused, and then the knee jerk reaction there is, "Well, what about me?" You know, "What about me?" And I'm all like, "Roll up behind a person and get in here with us," you know?

What does Afrofuturism means to each of you? What role you see games playing in this idea? What does Afrofuturism mean for our societies?

B. Dave: I just think for me, I love Star Trek. I've grown up on Star Trek. But a lot of times, futures get lumped into two big chunks where either there's the disaster future and just everything's awful, and 17% of the cast might be people of color, whatever. Or Utopian futures that are post racial, where we're all just sort of mixed together, and I don't necessarily think that's good either. I mean, personally I love being Black. I love celebrating other people's cultures too. I love Hawaiian culture and Chinese culture and Japanese culture, and just everyone has something to offer, and diluting that I don't think is a positive thing.

So Afrofuturism is showing a future where Black people are still Black people. It may or may not be a positive one. Again, Cyberpunk was created by a Black man, by Mike Pondsmith. It's just a future where we're still around and our stories get told. In a bizarre manner of speaking, *Lovecraft Country* could be seen as an Afrofuturist tale even though it's set in the past. Here is this genre convention shown through the lens of the African American perspective. That's basically what it is, to me at least. You know, these things can be defined in a multitude of ways.

Tanya: For me Afrofuturism, and it's funny because it's one of those things that's like even if nothing that you're doing has the future in it, if you're Black and you wrote it, they just lump you in with Afrofuturism. Or you know, N.K. Jemisin and *The Fifth Season* and that trilogy, I'm working on RPG based on that. And people lump that in Afrofuturism, because she has unapologetically Black characters. And for me it's that we get to exist because so many of these stories just forget us. Like Dave said, it's like either the Black folks didn't make it

into the future, or we're all that, everybody in the movie is that weird, not defined shade of beige and brown where everybody is just trying to mix but nobody has a race any more. They just assume that we've just mixed to the point where everybody is just that kind of nondescript beige, as well as the world around it.

To me it's a joyous future. For me, Afrofuturism is more defined by Wakanda, by what N.K. Jemisin has written when she wrote the *Green Lantern* run, and Nnedi Okorafor (who actually defines their work as Africanfuturism and Africanjuism). And we get to exist, we get to write a future, we get to be in the future and forge it, and that's why all the humans or human-like people in Mother Lands are Black, they are depicted with dark skin and they're not like the too much cream in the coffee brown that a lot of futures posit the non white population as.

You know, and I'm very glad that everybody on the show, aside from me, is darker skinned, because how many times do you get to see dark skinned people that are having a good time, are actually happy and want to be there in these stories. So it just makes me super happy, that for me Afrofuturism is we just simply get to be there but we get to forge our own path.

Tanya DePass Recommends:

Selfishly, I recommend:

Rivals of Waterdeep

Black Dice Society

Into the Mother Lands

N.K. Jemisin's works

Anything Gabe Hicks is doing

B. Dave Walters Recommends:

being honest with yourself

walks around the block

The Meditations by Marcus Aurelius

kettlebells

CROWDFUNDING!

Name

Tanya DePass and B. Dave Walters

Vocation

Game developers

□