

PRIME MATERIAL

Prime Material #5. Published for Alarums & Excursions in November 2013 by Rogers Cadenhead, 135 Jenkins St., Suite 105B #244, St. Augustine, FL 32086. Email: cadenhead@gmail.com. Web: <http://cadenhead.org>.

I Knew There Was a Reason to Save That

Many years ago when I was a wee gaming bairn, I saved an essay by the RPG designer Aaron Allston full of advice for aspiring writers in the field.

Allston, one of my favorite designers going all the way back to *Autoduel Champions* in 1983, is a game designer and novelist with a huge list of published credits.

Some of my favorites among his work are the game products *Justice Inc.* (1984), *D&D Rules Cyclopedia* (1991), *Hollow World Campaign Set* (1990) and the fifth edition of *Champions* (2002); and the novels *Doc Sidhe* (1995) and the *Legacy of the Force* novel *Betrayal* (2006). I just picked up his newest *Star Wars* expanded universe title, *X-Wing: Mercy Kill* (2012).

Allston's essay has been on my computer through at least four upgrades. After stumbling upon it again recently, I contacted Allston for permission to reprint it. He not only agreed, but said he'd revise it.

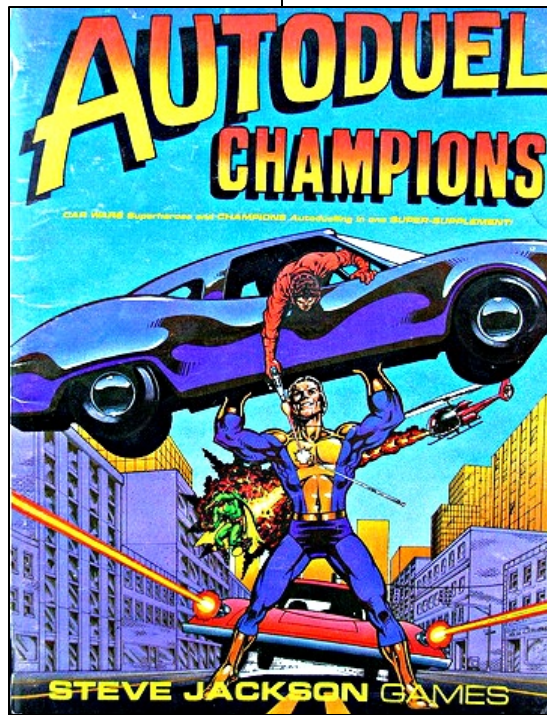
He explained, "The following text is not exactly an article — it originated as a pair of e-mail messages written for the Red October bulletin board in 1993 in response to another user's request for advice on authoring RPG

supplements. Some of the advice in this piece may now be out of date. A few details from the original piece, chiefly related to game companies no longer in business in 2013, have been revised or removed."

Known best today as a novelist, Allston has more advice for aspiring writers. In February, he self-published a 413-page ebook, *Plotting: A Novelist's Workout Guide*.

The Kindle book is available for \$9.99 from Amazon. The book is offered "for aspiring writers at all levels of experience. Written by a genre specialist, it is also genre-friendly and fanfic-friendly."

For more on his career and current projects, visit his website AaronAllston.com.



Aaron Allston: On Writing Supplements

Any advice I could give right now would be pretty simplistic — “But that’s so obvious” sort of stuff. But it’s my advice.

First, know your market. Read the game supplements you like or admire — and then re-read them, studying them, not as a gamer but as a writer. Examine their structure. Take notes on what sort of information they provide and what sort they don’t. Ask questions like, “What should this supplement have provided but didn’t?” Try to understand what sort of quantity of information can fit into the different sizes of game supplements. The engine of a car isn’t as pretty as its exterior, but it makes up much more of what constitutes a “car.”

Second, don’t use anyone else’s failings to justify your own. It doesn’t matter if the last dozen, or 40, supplements were badly proofread; plan to make yours better. If every supplement you’ve seen has serious mathematical errors in the character sheets, plan to do better. If most of the adventures you see have painful gaps in their internal logic, plan to do better. The statement “He got away with it, so why shouldn’t I?” is merely the first step on a long path to envy, which is an emotion utterly destructive to the creative process, and an excuse for mediocrity.

Third, know your market, part II. Sit down and think about what you, as a gamer, want in a supplement. Don’t drag in any writer considerations whatsoever. Then ask gamers you know the same question. When their opinions differ from your own, spend some time assuming that they’re right and you’re wrong. (Whether or not they are, it’s

valuable practice. It helps you see things from the eyes of a person or character who is not yourself.) Once you’ve arrived at a set of elements you think belong in a supplement, compare that set to supplements already in print. See how well or poorly they’ve addressed those needs, and try to think up ways you could address them ... with economical writing, and without rubbing the readers’ or other writers’ noses in “what they’ve needed all along.”

Fourth, don’t waste your time. If you seriously want to write a supplement, query the company first and find out if they have any need for it. They may not. If you write a supplement and send it in unsolicited — “over the transom” — and discover that another writer has turned in a supplement on the exact same subject, a supplement contracted for by the owning company, you’re going to be peeved, and out a lot of work hours.

Fifth, write about it, don’t talk about it. That may sound contrary to the fourth point above, but it isn’t. I don’t mean “write the supplement whether or not they want it.” I do mean “don’t substitute telling people about your great ideas for writing them.” You don’t have to write your supplement first; you can write articles, participate in APAs, keep a journal, regularly write long letters to a correspondent, etc. If you do this regularly, reliably, your writing will probably improve.

Sixth, be prepared for disinterest. If the company you’re interested in isn’t interested in handing out major supplement assignments to an untried writer, don’t get

mad — learn what it takes to become a tried writer. That means things like articles, short magazine-sized adventures, literate letters to the editor, etc. Remember to query first.

Seventh, learn what it is to look professional. Request or download the writers' guidelines of companies you want to deal with. If a company doesn't yet have writers' guidelines, though the annually-updated *Writer's Market* (and many other books) won't have much on the game industry, it will have a section on manuscript preparation. Read this and take it to heart. Exact details vary from year to year, but a manuscript that looks professional will get a better reaction from an editor than a sloppy-looking one. Even if the editor doesn't buy it, he/she may remember it.

Eighth, remember that this is mostly a hobby market. If money is a significant motive here, think through your goals again. At most game company pay rates, unless you can write several thousand clean, publishable words a day, you can't make minimum wage on your project. If you're not writing to fill a gap in the system or game line, or to give a present to the gamers out there, or to answer a basic need to write and see your name in print, you're probably messing around with motives inconsistent with a happy ending for your project.

Elaborating on the paragraph above, I think it's a good idea to consider the idea of the "present to the gamers." Let's say you see a really great movie. Later, you take a friend to see it, too. You're not just going out to the movie — you're giving a friend a present, the present of an experience you anticipate to be an enjoyable one. It's not a requirement, but bringing that same attitude

to your game writing can result in better, more long-lasting work.

Most of my best work has been with projects where I felt I was bringing a fun experience to gamers who hadn't had it before. For example, a lot of gamers don't know who Edgar Rice Burroughs is; of those who do, a significant proportion believe he's the guy who invented Johnny Weissmueller. Growing up on the man's *Pellucidar* and *John Carter of Mars* novels, I felt that the experience of the Lost Worlds Romance hadn't been well-captured for the gaming audience. When I wrote *Land of Mystery* in 1985, I was trying to bring that sort of experience to gamers and enable them to bring it to their own gamers. And *Lands of Mystery* was some of my best work.

Ninja Hero (1st Edition, 1990) is another example. I felt like martial arts hadn't been adequately represented in the Hero System. People weren't having lots of fun with them. I wrote a supplement to try to translate the fun I saw on the screen into the game system. My idea wasn't to provide rules — it was to provide fun, and that meant trying to create rules that weren't particularly intrusive but still brought a lot of genre options and opportunities into the game. *Ninja Hero* worked, for those whom it did work, because it was a present meant to provide, not to impress.

So, ninth and last, think about what you're giving your readers. You're trying to give them a good time, and you shouldn't lose sight of that. If it's an adventure, calculate how the players can have a good time while cruising the plot. Add more neat stuff. Calculate how they can have a bad time, and try to cut out as much of that as possible,

through advice to the GM, through the elimination of plot points and characters that don't add anything to the adventure. If it's a rules or genre supplement, try to anticipate, through your own wishes and the wishes of others, what the gamers will probably want from the supplement, and provide that stuff. Playtest it until it bleeds, until you're sure that it can be cleanly absorbed into the lines of the game system, until you're certain it won't keep dragging people out of the role-playing and into the rule-playing.

Then, prepare to be wrong again. Because if you make it into print, you're going to run into people who are certain that you failed or betrayed them by not providing what they wanted. If they're a distinct minority of the people you talk to, you probably did a good job, but it will be a painful encounter anyway.

And that's all the advice I have. I hope you find it helpful.

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Messages to the Prime Material

3: I wonder sometimes that seeing some people like SF/comics/gaming (choose one), but not SF/comics/gaming (choose another one), how crossover/tie-in items from one to the other do? How do gaming comics do? How do games based on SF do? ...

MCs: I am doing what I usually do when it comes to modern computers, stand on the sidelines and absorb as much as I can, mostly because I can't possibly afford iPads or tablets, but might like one. Sounds like you and Ed and I have some things in common. I've never been able to make a living as a journalist, though. I moved into publishing, which was great back then, but nearly dead now.

4: *Heathen Woman's Friend*? My, that wouldn't work these days, would it? Such an assumption that you're a heathen before being proven Christian. And what would the pagans say about this? And such arrogant

opinions about other religions, too. At least at some point, the term "heathen" was done away with, but still ...

I've been to a couple of craft faires where Krampus is represented as much as Santa is. Seing we're now in the final third of the year, and Christmas is at the end of it, doing some things Krampus-wise might some fun.

— **Lloyd Penney**, Sept. 5, 2013

Out of the three, gaming is far more receptive of crossovers from comics and science fiction.

A big push in games has always been to adapt or expand works from other media so players could play in those worlds.

The first I recall buying was TSR's *Indiana Jones* role-playing game from 1984, which had one product that infamously asserted a trademark on the term Nazi™ for Lucasfilm Ltd.

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