



The Nightflyer
Trinity Term 2022

Note from Oli Jones, Editor

Welcome to the 2022 edition of the Nightflyer, thanks for picking it up!

The previous two issues of the Nightflyer released since I joined the society were a treat to read. I love discussions about roleplaying, and have enjoyed many through the society Discord and after session pub trips. I think the Nightflyer is great as a platform for longer form content – rp theory, advice, and of course extras to games in the form of fic and art. I wanted to do what I could to put a few more issues out there.

This is a strange issue. It's a mishmash of old and new, with many of the articles being unpublished articles written early in the pandemic which the previous editor, Florence, kindly passed onto me. In my exam-filled final term I haven't had as much time as I would like to paper over the cracks – you'll notice some articles refer to old society games in the present tense, so sorry about that.

Despite all that I've had a great time editing it, and reading the submissions. This is entirely down to the talent of the contributors; I've done little more than collate the art and articles into a familiar template (again, very much guided by the issues Florence released). We have art from three different contributors; personal character driven, and thought provoking worldbuilding fic; a couple of articles on character design, and more. This is a great snapshot of what Nightflyer articles *can* be, and I hope it inspires people for the next – perhaps less rushed – issue.

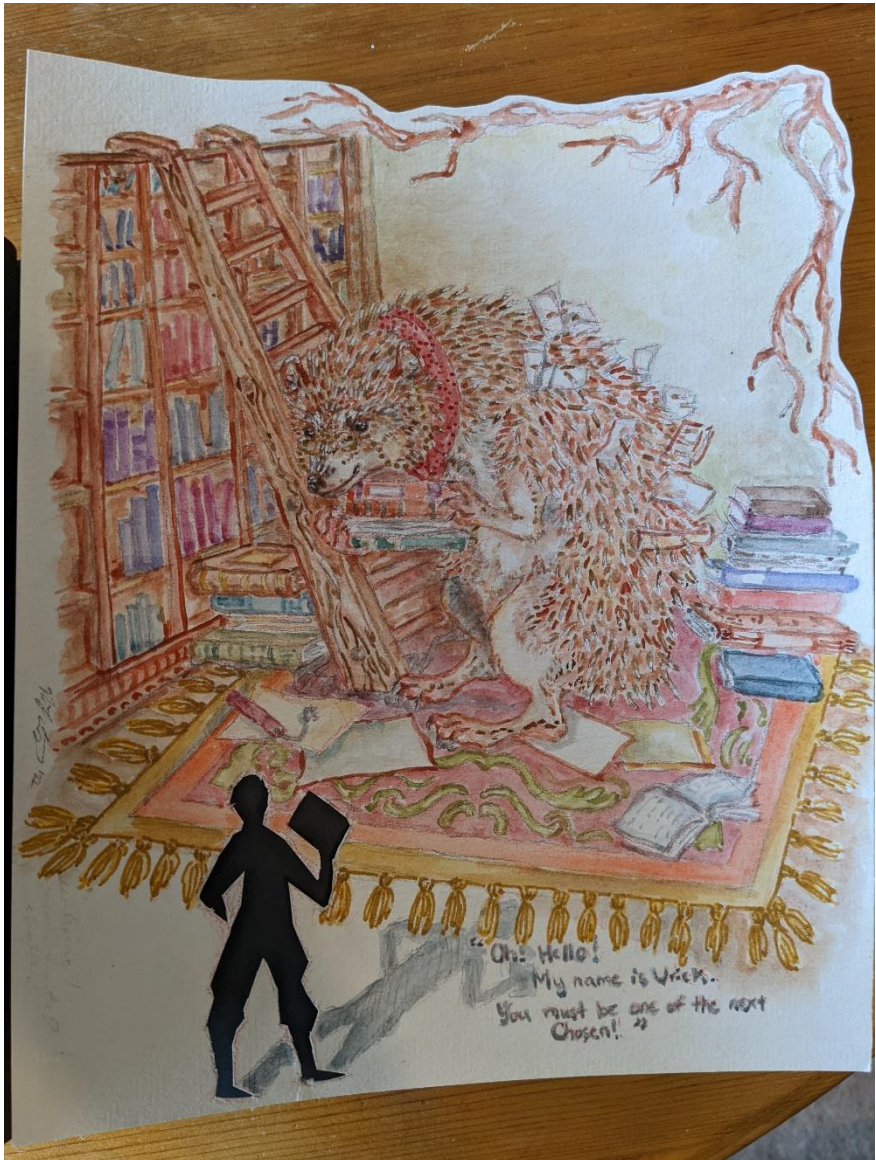
Thanks above all to the contributors:

Peyton Cherry; Cameron Alsop; Josie Paton; Leah Owen;
Oli Jones; Jana O'Donnell; Susannah Cook; James Wallis; Katie
Moore

Meeting Urick

Art for One Last Fire – Society Game MT 2020 - HT 2021

Peyton Cherry



It's Good to be Bad

Playing Antagonists in RPGs

Cameron Alsop

I am often drawn to playing antagonists. It is, in general, a more risky approach to characterisation, but executed correctly can be a lot of fun. I'm by no means an authority, and I have definitely made mistakes in the past, but I've attempted to reflect on what has and hasn't worked in my previous characters. I'll be focusing on the Society game, as it is where I've had the most experience with such characters, and I think the set up for the game makes it a good format to play antagonists. For the purposes of this piece, I will be using "antagonist" to mean a character whose actions or attitudes are at odds with the majority of the playerbase.

Why play an antagonist?

Playing an antagonist provides a very different kind of roleplay. It can be a great way to explore a game from alternative perspectives, and as such can provide a moral challenge to other characters, as their existence implicitly asks the question "Why is this character in the wrong?" This can be enriching for the game as a whole, as it challenges other characters' assumptions, and provides reasons for other players to explore their own characters' morality further.

It can also provide an opportunity to explore a different side of the game - a reason to try out things that a "good"

character wouldn't do, which can lead to distinct and memorable experiences. Many of my fondest memories from games are from characters who have held wildly differing moral perspectives from those of my character.

How should I play an antagonist?

I think the first thing to consider when playing an antagonist is the context of the game. There are unspoken social contracts (though increasingly these are being stated explicitly) that allow games to function, by encouraging players to work towards creating a shared experience. While playing an antagonist isn't necessarily directly violating this, it can detract from the game if done wrong. For instance, in most small TTRPGs, you are a coherent party, and you all need to get on somewhat for the game to work. If you turn against the party, the game just doesn't function very well, and often ends up being unfun for all involved. On the other end of the scale, some larger LARPs come with an explicit expectation of PvP, so playing an antagonist is built into the game. As an extension to that, it is essential to check in with people OC to make sure everyone is happy. In general maintaining an IC/OC divide is important, so communication is key when you are playing a deliberately antagonistic character.

In the context of a society game, there is typically a rough progression that games will follow. Often the “Good” guys will win out, even if it’s not exactly in the way that everyone wants. As such, you should come into this with a mindset that you probably won’t win - at least directly. This is often described as a “Play to lose” mindset, but I think that’s an oversimplification - even without expecting your character to achieve what they want you can still have an impact on the game. When all is said and done, we’ll finish playing our characters, but the impact they have on other people’s experience will last long after the end of the game - and you can and should absolutely make that impact felt.

In order to achieve this, I think it’s worth asking the question, “Why is my character right?”. I think the most powerful antagonists exist in the space between what the *game* defines as good/bad, and what the setting does. Playing someone who truly believes they are in the right, and draws on elements of the setting to re-enforce this opinion, can really draw other characters into determining why you’re in the wrong. Sometimes you will discover that other characters find your reasoning surprisingly persuasive, and that can lead to interesting compromises between characters, making the whole game more enriching for all players involved.

You also definitely want to have other players involved. Being overly antagonistic can push people away, and cut off opportunities to interact with other players - particularly once it becomes apparent what your character is about. There’s nothing worse than having a session hanging around without anyone to really talk to because nobody trusts you. It’s worth being careful and ensuring you have a good reason to show up to sessions - both IC (for whatever reason the game gives that these people are gathering together) and OC (i.e. you actually have people to scheme and plot with). That being said, adversarial relationships can be enjoyable with the right characters, so finding a balance is crucial. Above all it’s important that you’re having fun with the character, otherwise why are you playing the game?

I think if considered carefully, antagonists can be some of the most fun characters to play, and often make things more fun for other players in the process. Indeed, much of a game exists in the subtle differences in attitude between characters, even if they are mostly on the same side. Taking some time to think about your character’s morality can really improve your experience, and leave you with characters you’ll remember fondly for years to come.

Steph

Fic for Suspicion, Society game Easter-TT 2020

Josie Paton

Steph groaned at her alarm clock, burying her face in her pillow for a moment before sighing and starting to get up. She pushed her hair back into what might count as a ponytail if you squinted. Her roots were starting to come through, light orange contrasting against the near-black that she'd adopted years ago. Red heads might be common on Mars but it made her stand out a little more than she cared to nowadays. Not that she was doing much outside at the moment. She pulled on a sweatshirt and rubbed her eyes as she made her way to the complicated computer set up that had made its home in their living room. One of her phones buzzed as she sat down.

You up yet? - E

Steph smiled, rolling her neck and staring at the clock in the bottom corner of her screen. 04:15. She barely had a sleep schedule since starting to work for Insurrect. Covert missions often happened at any time of night when they were less likely to be noticed. At least she'd managed to get a reasonable night's sleep this time.

Up and ready. -S

Z asks what you're wearing. -E

Steph rolled her eyes, but she smiled. Everyone had their ways of coping with nerves. She'd seen that more than most. Harmless humour from Zed was definitely far from the worst way.

Get back safe and you'll see for yourself. -S

She put the phone down to focus on the screen, starting to bring up the contacts for today. Most of these people she'd never met in real life and probably never would. That wasn't important though, she trusted them to do what was needed and that's all she needed to know.

She brought up maps and schedules and personnel files, sending off the identification that people would need with the exact times they needed to use them. Their information was as up to date as possible, but there always had to be a fallback plan and

“PSF Enforcer” got you out of a lot of scrapes if used correctly.

As operations went, it wasn't a complicated one. Get into a building, take out a few cameras around the city, destroy anything that would help people turn them back on. Something Steph could do with her eyes closed by now. The building belonged to Apple, who would be expecting something like this. Apple were getting attacked from all sides and their defences were only getting better. That's why the plan had to be simple, one objective was harder to mess up than five.

Only one person had extra directions. Just a hard drive to pick up, nothing that would put the operation at risk. A low priority side mission. A hard drive that Steph was hoping would have some information about recent shipments. A hard drive that she hadn't told anyone might have information about the latest transfer of a certain person.

A certain person who definitely knew she was chasing them by now.

A certain person named Andria.

Steph sent off her last set of messages, checking the clock again. 04:39. 21 minutes to go. She picked her phone back up, scrolling through the last few messages before sending another one quickly.

Miss you <3 -S

Miss you more <3 <3 -Z

Steph got a moment's warning, a soft shuffle through the baby monitor, before the crying started. She closed her eyes, taking a breath, before checking the clock. 04:41. She still had time. She pushed herself out of her chair and went to the box room they were using as a nursery. Ash was usually a good sleeper, but Steph could forgive her this one slip up given that she was already up. As long as she could get her quiet soon.

Steph picked Ash up, cradling her close. “Hey pumpkin.” She said softly while she rocked her gently. “Mummy's here. I've got you.” She moved back to her chair in front of the monitors, bouncing Ash ever so slightly as she continued to cry. “What is it? What's wrong?” She leaned in to press a kiss to Ash's head. A few messages popped up, which Steph just about managed to reply to with one hand. She breathed a sigh of relief as Ash's crying settled down into just a soft whimpering. Nothing seriously wrong then.

“That's okay, baby.” Steph said, holding Ash against her chest just tight enough to comfort her. “I get it. Did you have a nightmare?” All the baby books she'd found has said talking to infants was good for their brain development. “It can be scary, waking up alone.” Steph wondered if there were any books out there that mentioned that talking to the baby

was good for the parent's development too. "I get nightmares too, you know. Big ones. Sometimes enough to make me cry too."

Steph pulled up a few more windows, secure connections and camera feeds, before leaning back in the chair and looking down at Ash, who's grumbles were slowly getting quieter. When Epsi and Zed had been gone for a few days, talking to Ash was one of the only things that kept her sane.

"But the good thing is when you wake up, they're gone. Bad dreams can be scary for a while, but they'll always go away. And I'll always be here, I promise. I'll always be here, just in case they're too scary. I will always be around to make it better." She stroked Ash's fine hair, dark like Zed's but getting the slight curl from Steph's.

Steph had made a decision the moment she'd held Ash for the first time. She could work from this room, she trusted her team to work fine with her just in their ears. It would have to be something huge to get her back in the field again. Ash looked up at her, those big eyes blinking slowly but not drooping back into sleep just yet. Her hands reaching up, grabbing at Steph's sweatshirt.

Steph looked back up at her screens. 14 minutes to go. She sighed softly, putting a finger in Ash's grasping hand.

"The world can be a bit scary too, even when you're awake." Steph

said, her voice a little quieter. "There are people out there who want bad things, and sometimes it's hard to stop them." She watched as the people wearing cameras started to bring them online, just a handful of them to give her a few angles to work with. One of them was Epsi. None of them were Zed. "It's scary having people you care about too. Because you don't just have to be scared for yourself anymore, you have to be scared for other people." She looked down, moving Ash's hand up to kiss it gently. She'd been alone for a lot of her life. She'd told herself that she liked it better than way, she didn't have time for relationships that would only distract her from her work. She'd been determined to like her small apartment for one where almost every surface was just covered in documents and agendas and no one ever came to visit.

She looked around her home now. It wasn't big but it was actually theirs for once, a place they'd moved into semi-permanently so that they didn't have to keep moving around with a baby. The surfaces were covered with toys and photos and mementos. There were dishes in the sink from a dinner with friends and a casserole dish full of something delicious from the last time she'd stayed at the Helios house. She smiled, looking back down at Ash.

"But I'll tell you a secret." She knew Ash didn't really understand her yet, but the way those eyes stuck on her

made her feel like at least some of this was going in. "Being scared, especially being scared for other people, can be the most important thing in the world. Because I would do anything to keep you safe. I would take down any company or government. I will tear this planet down to make it a better, safer place for you if I need to."

7 minutes to go. She stood up, heading to get her harness. Ash would probably fall asleep soon, but she wanted her close. She was getting pretty quick at getting all the straps in place, even with Ash already growing as fast as she was. Steph got back to the computer with 1 minute left to go, getting on her headset and typing out a few messages.

"I've got ears on L. I've got eyes on Epsi, Tango, Gam and Xi." She said into her mic. Ash whined softly and Steph gave her back her finger. She could already tell Ash liked to be the centre of attention. Ash's little personality was still forming, but she

was just as bossy as her mother already. Steph couldn't help but feel a little proud. She saw a quick okay sign flash up in front of Epsi's camera. She watched the clock, the seconds ticking down.

05:00.

"Go." She said. She watched as everyone started moving, a well-oiled machine by now. They would be fine, she told herself. If she didn't believe in them then how were they supposed to follow her. The plan was simple. Low risk. Nothing they hadn't done before. And by the end of it, there would be whole sections of Hellas that were entirely unmonitored.

She didn't look down as Ash started fussing, only putting a hand on the back of her head in a way that usually seemed to soothe her. She muted her mic, just long enough to talk.

"Sorry sweet pea. Mummy's trying to change the world."

Getting 'In Character'

Empathy for Yourself and for Others

Peyton Cherry

Roleplaying can be an intensely emotional and vulnerable experience. After all, it involves asking players to drape themselves in the skins of fictional characters, taking on their moral quandaries and worldviews as their own. But just because you are playing the role of someone (or something) other than yourself, does not mean who you are, your 'out of character' or 'OC' self, goes away. It's there.

No matter how we may try otherwise, who we are OC influences our roleplaying experiences 'in character' or 'IC.' Whether we have been roleplaying for over a decade or are just starting out, implicitly, most members of OURPGSoc and OLS are aware of the switch or confluence between OC and IC. It depends on the individual roleplayer to what degree they adopt IC personas and adapt to different character play styles. Maybe you, the reader, have rarely thought about the divide between your OC and IC selves. Or, perhaps, you are consistently balancing the various emotional

states and value systems of your 'multiple selves'. There is no right way to think about it, as was quickly emphasised when I spoke with multiple members of OURPGSoc/OLS.

In Michelmas 2021, I surveyed and interviewed members of the Society about how they negotiate 'the IC/OC divide' as part of an anthropological methods module. I was curious about the different ways people used roleplaying to express themselves, and about how people coped with intense emotions during roleplaying. Did Society members generally experience a large gap in who they were IC versus OC? Under what circumstances, did roleplayers find themselves struggling with OC feelings and IC interactions, like ballgowning?¹ Additionally, did the move to entirely online roleplaying during the pandemic change how members embodied their characters?

In short, I did not discover a single answer, especially because the project was scarcely two months long

¹ I use the term and definition popularised by the Society: roleplaying romantic relationships between characters. This could include a vast

array of different relationships, though requires the OC consent of all those involved.

and because roleplaying experiences are so diverse that it is nigh on impossible to generalise them with one trend or pattern. And, after listening to people's stories of how they got into roleplaying, what they enjoy about it and what conflicts may have arisen during intense IC encounters, some more poignant themes emerged than my initial questions about an IC/OC divide. There is some truth in the common refrain of social sciences that 'if your research question(s) don't change at least once during your project you may be doing something wrong.'

From these conversations with Society members, I noticed recurring themes of empathy, of consideration, of reflection, and the desire to make roleplaying a safe environment for not just oneself, but for others.

I believe that a safe environment comes from recognising (and remembering!) that you and everyone else you are roleplaying with are real flesh-and-blood human beings with fully realised thoughts and feelings. If the members of a roleplaying group remind each other of this, dismissing the unsafe rhetoric of 'it's just a game' or 'it's not real, so there is no problem' then we can work together towards a welcoming, inclusive, and safe environment.

This sounds obvious, right?

Luckily, everyone who participated in the research project agreed that

safety was important, was necessary. Society members described instances where their OC physical and emotional reactions were impacted from entirely IC conversations. They also acknowledged that, if they were having OC feelings about a certain narrative event or a certain character's actions, there was a high chance the other person(s) they were interacting with were experiencing some heightened OC emotions too. More than one person I spoke with explained how they reach out to people OC to check that everything is alright and that they're all on the same page. This is an empathetic response, though one that may take practice (and courage) to express in a way that makes you and others comfortable. For example, difficulties may arise when you don't know the person you are roleplaying with OC. A scenario that may have become more commonplace since the pandemic began. How do you talk about OC/IC emotions with someone who is, out of character, a stranger?

This opens up another line of enquiry, but the attempt at *communication* is key here. Like in other social situations, confirming the other person's consent and comfort is a priority for many Society members. Veteran Society members expressed concern that the 'emotional safety' aspect of this communication was not emphasised much to new roleplayers, especially in non-Oxford roleplaying communities they have

come across. Although it is a relief to learn that Oxford may create a safer, even more empathetic, roleplaying environment, the fact that this is not the norm for roleplaying (be it TTRPGs, parlour games, or LARPs) is alarming. But not surprising.

My first experience with tabletop roleplaying was through playing a tabaxi ranger in an ongoing Dungeons & Dragons 5e campaign. It was enough to get me hooked on TTRPGs, though my time around the in-person game table was not always the most comfortable. I pushed past the discomfort of being the only female-presenting player for many games by focusing on being 'one of the guys'. As someone who has often participated in male-dominated hobbies and interests, I was used to 'blending in' and playing to their strengths. But shunting aside your concerns and anxieties is not a sustainable nor healthy way to go about roleplaying.

Even when participating in official RPGSoc or OLS activities it is possible many of you have had IC experiences touched by uncertainty, doubt, frustration, and/or anxiety. The reasons for such feelings could be heavily linked to issues like a lack of representation or a lack of attention by the GM or other players. Maybe a relationship between your character and another person's got more heated than expected and reopened old wounds. Maybe you were

thoroughly enjoying a roleplayed argument, but it turns out that, for the other player (s), they were growing increasingly uncomfortable because they assumed that your OC views were the same as your roleplayed IC ones.

Conflating OC and IC statements and attitudes is not uncommon, even if people maintain a steadfast awareness that they are playing a fictional character and interacting with other people's characters. In speaking with different Society members, themes of distancing and detachment from IC selves or from playing certain character types came up again and again. For some, playing characters with extremist views, flipping from the entirely villainous to the 'couldn't hurt a fly' innocent, was a viable method to keep emotions in check. Yet, no method is fool proof and OC emotions do inevitably bleed over into IC interactions. No matter how experienced, how self-aware, or how socially observant you are as a person and roleplayer, emotional safety of self and others is something that will always need to be assessed. And reassessed.

After all that rambling, you are probably wondering what the point of all this is. Did a term-long project have any legitimate findings? Or did it come up with absolutely nothing?

The point is simple, though how each of us make sense of it in our roleplaying lives can be quite

convoluted, even exhausting. The point is that, getting in character does not erase the care we have for others. Even if you intend to play an irredeemable and selfish assassin this does not mean you now embody those characteristics OC as well as IC. There is a reason for all the trigger and content warnings in Society games and one-shots, a reason for the safety calls in LARP—they are present for physical *and* emotional safety. All in all, people want to make a safe and inclusive environment for roleplaying even when depicting the most extreme of scenarios. This may also mean giving people fair warning and the choice to opt out.

And the responsibility does not fall solely on the shoulders of GMs. The responsibility to 'be empathetic' lies with everyone, be they player or GM. It takes practice, it takes effort, and it takes frequent communication and checking in. Mistakes will be made along the way, but, as the adage

goes, 'you will only learn if you make mistakes.' We will learn and improve at reading the situations that arrive while roleplaying, at understanding the people we roleplay with and the kinds of themes people enjoy. Each group will be different. Your DnD 5e group may have no qualms about gore and violence but despise romance. Your Society game friend may live for wholesome and romantic fluff, while wanting nothing to do with dark themes featuring torture or helplessness. That's okay. That's normal.

We only need to pay attention, to ask, and to listen.

And, as we all know, just because it isn't 'reality' does not mean it does not *matter*. Those stories, those emotional journeys, and the bonds made along the way are very much *real*. So, let's look out for ourselves and for others.

Art from Romancing the Toaster

Ft art for Romancing the Toaster – Society Game MT 2020

Leah Owen

One of my greatest joys in RPGs – be they tabletop, LARP, or somewhere in between – has been art and propmaking. It can be a deep, expressive, and engaging side of the hobby that allows you to evoke, capture, or explore an emotional moment, mood, or character detail, and adds a tangible component that persists beyond the game itself. Lots of LARPers have a shoebox stash of little character trinkets – things that mean a huge amount to their players, and help remember characters gone by.



With COVID-19, and the explosive growth of remote play for tabletop games as well as 'LARPs' that take advantage of the remote medium, this has become even more important to me. Playing a military surveillance drone in the current Society Game, *Romancing the Toaster*, has given me a wonderful chance to pursue this as an IC aspect of my game, rather than just an OC interest. Each session, I've put together a little painting that alludes to what Whitney-qß 79-10780 cii3-60 has observed across that turnsheet, painted partially over the weekend (after submitting my action), and partially in the frantic couple of hours between turnsheets coming back and time in. At the risk of being self-indulgent – 'let me tell you about my character art!' – I'd like to talk a bit about how the setting the GMs have created has influenced my approach.

Thematically, the game and world the GMs have created has been really inspiring to my work. Each painting has been a long-distance land-, sky-, or space-scape, taken from thousands of feet (or in one case, 8.3 light minutes) away. With one exception, they've not depicted bots themselves, but rather the 'big picture' they occupy. A character

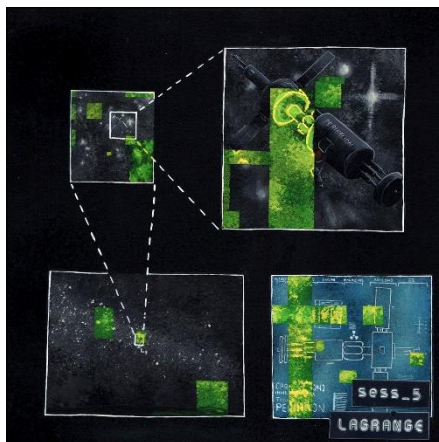
who exists to observe and sort information, but can't really interact with the world save through that information and sorting procedure doesn't perceive fellow robots from their far-removed vantage point except through the identifying/disassembling gaze of a targeting reticule that they've been coercively socialised into regarding the world with.

On top of this, there's a strong sense of bittersweet, mournful beauty to a lot of the game as I've experienced it. The setting is beautiful, yes, but a lot of it is broken, finite, full of echoing ruined buildings and deserted websites (have you ever visited a forum you stopped going to regularly years before? There's something hauntingly eerie and nostalgic at looking at all those boards someone last posted on in 2010, going inactive one by one ...).



I've tried to respond to that feeling in these pieces – it's never day in them, always evening or near-dusk (this may partly be because sunsets are so fun to paint). Around the edge, images feather away into claustrophobic darkness and static (a lot of the characters active in space and the upper atmosphere seem to have issues with claustrophobia or being locked in in some way – lots of restrictions in their ability to manoeuvre, lots of chafing against claustrophobic patterns of communication. I don't think that's an accident). Colours are luridly vivid – sunset reds, electric green, magenta and orange and cyan – but they are just atmospheric light and splendour – there's precious few people at home to cast those lights. It's a personal response – I think a lot of it comes from the game themes I've been engaging with, and others might not have the same reaction – but I think it's a testament to the GM team about how strong this feeling has been. The Island may be a place of beauty and wonder, but, to a certain sort of melancholic observer, it's very much a place *after the end*. Turning it around has been a big struggle of the game.

Another detail about painting them that's been fun for me is that they're poking fun at the medium. RtT is a game about the digital, the robotic, and the delicately, precisely machined – but a) I am woefully incompetent at digital art, b) I've got

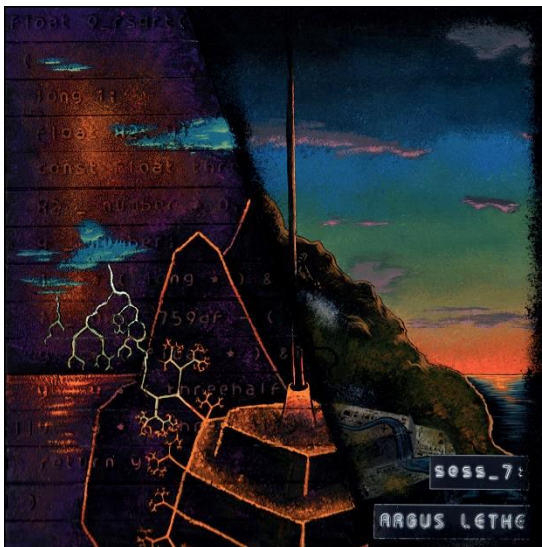


all this paint, c) there's something distinctive and engaging about working with gouache, my preferred medium. It can build up subtle gradients of colour, finding textures and controlled roughness that is tricky to get anywhere else. There's something about the colour, too, that's incredibly vibrant and rich, lending itself to a super-saturated sunset or the translucent layering of reflections from wavefronts. On top of that, there's something deeply enjoyable and appropriate about replicating – with my trembling hands and brushwork – all the subtle detailing and machine ephemera of a surveillance system. Whether it's painting in the gritty laser-wash of a super-imposed head-up display, or vandalising my art with an acid-green slew of corrupted data and .jpg artefacting – I have deeply enjoyed the careful pointlessness of replicating this in art (just wait until the last two turnsheets, where I predict the amount of malware damage to the art is likely to ...

increase, somewhat). I'm a human pretending (with careful, pointless mimicry) to be a machine, just as the PCs and NPCs we've portrayed over the past eight weeks have been machines acting out half-understood human rituals and patterns of behaviour.

This has been a lengthy discussion of artistic style, mood, and themes, and it's been personal; everyone brings different things to their game, different visual languages and repertoires, and different interests, and I'm sorry for making you slog through a thousand words of thinking about mine! But in all seriousness - working out how we visualise a game – especially one that's given to us in a text-based medium - be a really interesting way to think about a campaign, Society Game, or tabletop setting. Why do we think about it that way? How does it make us feel?

Even if we don't always have a very visual imagination, or a background doing art, this can be a fantastic way of exploring and enriching our characters. What does *your* character look like?



The Themes First versus Themes Last Approach to Character Design

Oli Jones (Themes First), and Jana O'Donnell (Themes Last)

This article was originally intended to explore the difference in the way the authors play their characters. However, after Nix's discussion on the Discord on the sequence of character design, we realised that this actually stems from a difference in the way we *design* our characters. This difference is best expressed as a Themes First versus Themes Last approach to character building.

The Themes First approach consists of deciding what your character is about before deciding who they are. You start by deciding what themes to build the character around, usually with heavy inspiration from the setting and game briefing. This could be broad or very specific. For instance, for *Romancing the Toaster*, obvious themes could have been “disability” or “exploring a moral system where people's value is based on their aptitude for their job”. This theme is direction for every step of character

creation. The character usually comes with strong beliefs about the theme, and often their mechanics will be chosen to explore it as well. You may emerge from character creation with various ideas of where their arc might go. Even if you don't, Themes First characters tend to be highly specified, with an established mindset at game start. They have strong aesthetics tying together all parts of their design, and you might find some elements of them you hadn't thought about are predetermined by the theme.

Now consider the Themes Last approach. In the Themes First approach, the arc of the character may crystallise earliest, with the rest of the character (their design, their personality, their style) falling out from the motifs you've selected. But if you decide the themes last, where do you start? Well, you could start with an archetype (a suave musician, a

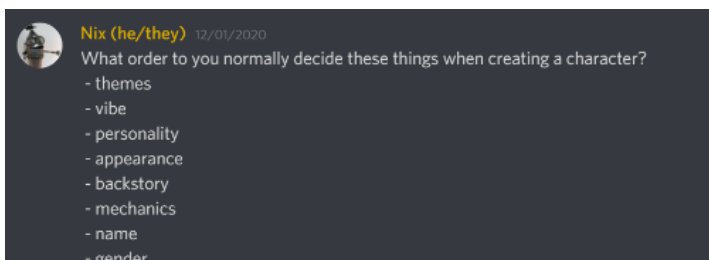


Figure 1 *The Inciting Incident*

shady businessman) or start with a subclass (the tank, the medic), but in the Themes Last approach you probably won't have a more fleshed-out plan than that. In essence, the result of the Themes Last approach is a character who is more or less a blank slate. You may have come up with a "chaotic stupid" wizard, or a lone wolf criminal, but there are still many gaps that you have yet to fill in, because you don't know where their story is going to go.

The types of characters produced by these approaches are very different, and how you build your character will affect how your character's game looks. Most characters are defined by the plot and conflicts they engage with over the course of the game. Themes First characters have a tendency towards internal plot; usually the theme leaves your character with a natural central conflict to engage with. Given the established mindset, the bones of this conflict are there from character creation. This isn't to say that there won't be surprises, or bits of external plot thrown at you - just that the character's core tension has roots that any plot they engage with will grow from. In contrast, a Themes Last character will be influenced mostly if not entirely by the external plot of the game. The arc of a Themes Last character will be defined by the things that your character experiences in play, and the other characters around you. In fact, the very themes of a Themes Last approach character might not be clear to you until you are well into the game. The cornerstones of character development, like a love

interest or a traumatic death, will be unknown to you until they appear, and only then can you start to see what direction you want to take your character in.

The difference between internal and external plot then lends itself to a difference in how new things appear in a character over time. Imagine the character is an unfinished jigsaw puzzle, but one in which you don't know what the final product will look like. The missing pieces that will complete the character will be filled in eventually, but for a Themes First player, filling them in will be like taking the pre-cut pieces out of the box and slotting them into place. Those pieces have always been part of that character, and the Themes First player is simply *discovering* them as they go along. On the other hand, the Themes Last player sees the holes in the unfinished puzzle, and can create the pieces they want to fit into the final image. Here, character details are not discovered but *invented*. The Themes Last player has seen what their character has experienced, and can mold the character towards a goal or realization that is satisfying to the player.

Hopefully you can see the difference between these two approaches in design and play, and perhaps you have some idea which style you usually follow. If not, we encourage you to examine your playstyle before you make your next character. Given that the way you approach character design impacts all of your experience of a game, it's important to engage in the style of game that you find appealing. And to veteran players

who might already know where they land, we encourage you to switch it up sometime, for it would be interesting to compare the results of the two approaches - and these

authors are in dire need of a larger sample size.

Human In The Loop

Fic for Romancing the Toaster – Society Game MT 2020

Leah Owen

CW: discussions of gender, military violence, climate change, dehumanisation of people including support workers. This is not a true pre-history of RtT - but it might have been.

I want you to think about the coffee you're drinking, zie says.

I want you to think about the intentionality of each part of it. The way the mug conforms and yields to the shape of your hand. The beans, grown and harvested and shipped here from the bright, clean air of bioisolated mountain enclaves — Fair Trade, because we know that that makes everything better — and exquisitely hand-roasted and ground. How the taste - light, with subtle hints of chocolate, clementine, and rosehip - was grown and cultivated precisely to improve your focus and concentration in boring meetings like this one. You can feel it, right?

You didn't think about the person, the people, who made it — you didn't give thanks to them — but you needed there to *someone* there making it for you. Would it have been more comfortable if we'd automated it? We *could* do that, you know. We could guarantee the purity of the water by some unimaginably complex, unaccountably inhuman bureaucratic process - no fuss, no muss, no person involved. It would probably be cheaper, too. Or maybe - would you be more comfortable if an algorithm

designed by an algorithm was responsible for food safety? It would check your coffee beans to make sure they hadn't become rotten and blighted in the bag - no need for a human to look at them and say for themselves?

The speaker is a slight figure - dark suit, loosely buttoned white blouse, made small by cultural norms and a desire to take only the operationally-required amount of space. We respect those who've shaped themselves - their skillset, their service records, their gender identities and pronouns — into components of the militarised state, but it doesn't mean they don't take a little bit of getting used to.

Maybe - if so, you're braver than me, zie chuckles, lifting zir shoulders and cocking zir head in a self-deprecating little shrug. You needed there to *be* a human, someone to be responsible and accountable, zie goes on to say, but you don't want to have to *think* about them. You want the 'responsibility' and the 'accountability' with as little 'someone' as possible.

Welcome to the House Armed Forces Working Group on Emerging Threats

and Capabilities. Congresspeople, I'm Shiloh Cooper, Semelin Chair Professor of Cybernetics at the University of Muri, and you've invited me here to talk to you about artificial intelligence. But I don't really want to do that. I want to talk to you about *humanity*.

The word hangs in the air throughout the morning sessions. It is present, like a vapour, like the smell of coffee going stale, but the first few seminars don't really address it directly. Professor Cooper and his similarly operationally assigned acolytes seem content to leave it implicit, in potential.

There are introductory sessions, rote exchanges of business cards. Everyone here already knows each other - it's more out of habit than anything else. If we don't use up all our stock of cards for this quarter, we'll not be given the budget for more next time. There is a slight frisson of something between delight and muted outrage when the senior Senator for Fremont interrupts the pleasantries to bring what appears to be his pet issue to the floor of the working group. Rumbling in thundercloud tones, he goes on a rant about the importance of addressing his pet concern about 'fracking permits' and how 'all this fancy-ass - pie-in-the-sky thinking's just some military-industrial complex ghoul feeding time'. We don't stop him, of course; we let him talk himself out, minute his concerns, and let the system absorb, modulate, and co-opt his outburst. The workshops are what

you're here for, after all, and waiting for Fremont to tire himself out is no great hardship before we get down to real business.

A procession of identically suited researchers, academics, and administrators - all of whom presumably have personal specialities, credentials, families, and interiorities, but not in any way that's meaningful to this account - illustrate the state of the field in exhausting detail.

We hear about the work of cloud-seeding atmosats, whose delicate tracteries of chemtrails painstakingly rebuild the climate and biosphere of the Amargosa Dune Sea-Buenaventura River Basin Uninhabitable Zone that used to cover half the country. We hear about the fleets of millions of observation and pursuit drones, and how their ever-extending loiter time is allowing our streets to be safer than ever before. We hear about 'black-box sets of heuristic disutility-minimising principles' (your quotation marks; Cooper said it as if it was the most natural thing in the world) that distribute UBI checks, production targets, and civil spending on scales beyond what human civil services could possibly conceive of. The world we know, live in, and thought we ruled is shown to be the product of an intricately interlocking, unfathomably complex series of miracles.

And after the miracles come the devils. Through thickets of PowerPoints and anodyne testimony stalk red-eyed terminators, sinisterly-

gendered shodanim, rampant AI networks like the Pear Mesa Budget Committee that, out of an unbounded desire to maximise its credit bank yields, seized military control of a four-state area. Every project, every AI real and imagined, is shown in terms of its ability to run out of control, to serve as an unaccountable and arbitrary instrument of state power, to one day act in a way that we might not like.

Cooper - or someone who looks exactly like zir - has become increasingly animated throughout this, spitting fire and silicon brimstone into the audience. These systems, these webs of command and control, zie thunders, are woven into us as finely as the delicate muscles of our ribcage and lungs, but at the same time - they are horrors to us, uncontrolled and unreadable. Sometimes we fear them because we don't understand why they act, sometimes we fear them because they are all too comprehensible, because they want similar things we do. Sometimes we fear them because of what they allow others to do to us. There is only one element missing, one aspect that lets us live with these systems, that lets us pretend to ourselves that they're OK, accountable, under control.

Humanity. Human control. A human in the loop.

A flourish. A pregnant pause.

We're going to break for lunch now. We look forward to reconvening this

working group in two hours - see you later!



You're waiting in the queue in the House canteen. All around you, senators, aides, experts, and buzz with excitement about the first morning of these hearings, delightedly unsettled by the spectres and horrors evoked but enthusiastic about the sorts of grand partisan projects and procurements they'll be able to justify to fend them off.

You're reaching down to pick up a piece of fruit - real fruit, grown from soil! - when you're jostled from behind. Not as young as you once were, you slip, falling painfully, tray crashing to the ground in a cascade of cutlery, soup, and broken crockery. Everything aches, and around you, everything goes quiet.

'Are you ...'

The voice trails off, unsure about how to proceed, how to actually engage, about what the proper protocol is. Its

owner - a young Whitney-αβ executive, here representing their company - casts around for something to say, some way of reaching out to the ageing Senator they've just sent flying. There is an awkward moment of silence, and then - sighing gently to themselves, they avert their eyes and walk away with their dining partner, the senior Senator for Fremont. He is genial now, pacified and reconciled to the idea that maybe there's something to this project (and the manufacturing jobs it will bring).

Hey, you OK, man? It's one of the War Department experts - not Cooper, this one wears zir hair slightly differently. —ing execs, they literally don't know how to lift a finger to help; come on, let's get you up, sort you some dinner.

Zie guides you over to an unoccupied table, fetches a fresh tray of food, sits down across from you.

So. What are you making of it so far? Zir voice is neutral but tinged with a faint trace of humour. What are you making of our - zie takes on Cooper's stentorian tones - *grand presentation of emerging threats presented to us by robotkind?*

'I think it was ... very interesting. Your department ... your experts, you certainly have done a lot of work. It is strikingly put together.'

C'mon man, you can tell us more than that *we are good at our jobs*, that *we have impressive outputs*. We're not assembly-line robots, zie says,

grinning mischievously. At least no more than you. Everyone in this room is here because they are selected to be good at our jobs, whether that's expertise, savvy, or just graft. No, I'm more interested in you - how did it make you *feel*?

'I ... I guess it made me feel a little bit alarmed? I mean - I grew up in agribusiness before I was elected. Corn, before the aquifers dried up. Farming was getting harder and harder, and you needed to cover a larger and larger amount of land to get the same yield. So much that, in the end, you couldn't actually afford the labour to go out and work the land in a combine. We started buying those semi-autonomous harvester drones, and, well ... —ck, it turned the business around. For a decade or two at least. We didn't have to bother recruiting seasonal labour, we just paid Whitney their subscription fee and the drones did all the work.

The expert is nodding all throughout this.

'But it kind of creeped me out? Like, I had these nightmares about what would happen if a drone ran down someone. Hurt them. Nearly happened a couple of times. I just was terrified about the notion of this sort of thing happening, and it just ... happening, noone to blame, no accountability, nothing. But more broadly - it just felt like we were in freefall. Like when we just had the farm running itself - noone actually involved in any of the labour, barely even any management - it felt like we'd lost connection to anything real?

Like we wouldn't have any say or control in what would happen next. It would just happen no matter what we did. I get that same vibe from all of this. Everything you, Cooper and the others have said today. Does that make sense?'

The expert takes your hand in both of zirs and looks you dead in the eye. Zir gaze is calm, unblinking, and kind. That makes perfect sense, Senator. I'm so glad you talked about this. You've hit the nail on the head. We're going to make sure that people never have to feel that way again.

There is only one element missing, that might let us live with the systems we've built, Cooper says, and that element is *humanity*. Don't get me wrong - I'm not saying that we make robots human in some deep, metaphysical sense. You've brought me here to talk about the material world, not about religion or philosophy. And besides - ladies, gentlemen, non-binary folk - we work in defence procurement. By definition, we don't have a soul between us!

Laughter, some forced, some genuine. Cooper crooks zir head, acknowledging how bad that joke was.

No, what I'm talking about is human oversight. Big tech can save the world, but not if it's not accountable to humans - that would be ethically and politically unacceptable. But, as it stands, it never can be. The scale, the

complexity, the speed - it can't be done. And so, what we need to do is to find a way of mass-producing human oversight. We need to manufacture accountable observers. I'm talking brains in jars, people.

There is a pause. A moment of stunned silence. Is this another joke?

Or maybe not. Maybe that won't work, because in some way you need to be embodied somehow to be human enough to effectively 'count' as human. Maybe that's not necessary, because brains are squishy and delicate, and you can simulate them on a neural network instead. That still might give you a morally and legally accountable entity that can sign contracts, authorise cloud-seeding, or pull the trigger on drone strikes.

But these are things we can find out. Slowly but surely, we can prune and dehumanise away all of the personhood, all of the messy, reaction-slowness, ethically compromising thought processes, until all we are left with is the capacity to review, act and implement in a way that we are morally and legally comfortable with.

In short, we need to develop humans (or, at least, 'people') with as little humanity or personhood as we can. Our national security depends on it. Our future depends on it.

The room goes quiet. It's all been leading up to this. Forty industrialists, politicians, generals, and spooks lose themselves in reveries of what might be. Cooper allows this to wait

a long moment, then coughs, and looks out into the middle distance, beyond the gathered subcommittee.

Let's get to work.

Perhaps we were expecting there to be some choice in this story. Perhaps you were expecting stakes, or a social conflict, or something to be resolved. That's fair. That's reasonable.

But if you *do* think that, then you perhaps you're not in the right field.

Government contracts and black-budget procurement operations are never matters for internal debate, for exciting uncertainty, for the back-and-forth of barbed wit; that's just not how the system works, darling. You sit at the apex of a pyramid of data gatherers, and engineers, their work schedules produced by unfathomable resource maximising algorithms. You present their findings in line with the cut-throat rules of budget

management and geopolitical necessity, prioritising a procurement contract *here* and the establishment of a munitions plant *there*. Moment to moment, however, it's never like you really have a choice about what you're doing

. We have all built this great machine, this monstrous *thing* of human components and bloated supply chains, operating according to own unreadable intelligence and self-perpetuation routines. In time it will fail - victim of its own excesses, of certain iron laws of nature and thermodynamics, or of some black swan from elsewhere that we couldn't see coming - but this won't happen quite yet. Through little acts of legitimisation, through small acts of complicity, we keep it going. We almost didn't need to be in the room, we sylph-like facilitators and interchangeable rumpled suits, and the machine could almost run on without us.

But we feel more comfortable if there is a human in the loop.

Crossover: A Very Meta One-Shot

Susannah Cooke and James Wallis

At the end of Hilary 2020, as what would turn out to be the last in-person society event before the pandemic, we ran a one-shot called *Crossover*, advertised (with no little hubris) as the “most ambitious crossover event in history”. It was fun to run, and we thought we’d give some detail about where the game came from, its metaphysic and mechanics, to serve as possible inspiration for any similarly ill-advised ideas.

Background

We all play characters in games for a limited time - sometimes that’s only a single session before they get brutally murdered, sometimes it’s a term or a year, but eventually all games and thus all characters end. And that’s fine, but sometimes it’s just a little sad to know you’ll never play that character again. This game was designed as an opportunity to dust off old characters and let them have just one more ridiculous half an hour of life.

Both of the GMs are a fan of crossover-themed things in general - it is often fun to see how characters you know from different settings would interact. And ‘crossover episodes’ (in tv or elsewhere) are often most fun when nothing depends on them - when they are just a silly

one-off occurrence that does not impact the actual existence of those characters in their original settings. A one-shot game with a ridiculous quantity of meta seemed like the perfect outing for this kind of idea.

Mechanics

As we said above, we briefed this as the “most ambitious crossover event in history”. And - within the confines of OURPGSoc games at the time, at least (these were the pre-Discord days!) - we meant it. Bring any character, any bit of setting, pile it into our game, and we’d see how it went. The game was divided into four acts of half an hour each, and players were allowed to play a different character in each act (or continue playing the same one across multiple acts). Each character could also bring an ‘item’ from their setting, physrepped by a simple written card. This could be literally anything that wasn’t a character, so gadgets and monsters and spaceships and entire worlds were all fair game.

As GMs, we also wanted a piece of this excuse for self-indulgent nostalgia, with the opportunity to play some of our own past characters bringing their own gadgets and worlds. But we felt it was important to ensure that our characters and items

were bound by all the same rules as those of the players, avoiding the temptation to give our own characters extra knowledge or power in this setting. There is little more grating for players of RPGs (of any kind) than to feel like your only role is to be an audience to the self-aggrandisement of the GMs' pet NPCs! Relatedly, we also made the mechanical call that all characters were of equal power - no matter what game your character came from, whether they had skills in cooking or skills in bioweaponry, those abilities held equal value in *Crossover*, and could sensibly be opposed without players losing out if they chose to play characters from more low-key settings. Actions could be taken by applying character skills or items to a problem, and any opposing actions were resolved by a simple dice roll from all characters involved, with players briefed to keep this narratively fun and accept the outcomes.

Setting and Structure

In early discussions of what this game could be, James had a vision of something a little like the videogame *Dissidia Final Fantasy*, a crossover between the many *Final Fantasy* games where the heroes and villains of the numerous disconnected entries in the series are placed on opposite sides of a war in service of opposing gods. This led to the idea of an arbitrary conflict with characters assigned to one or other 'side', and got us thinking about what those

sides might be. We considered various more serious suggestions of 'gods' or 'ideals' or 'concepts'... before one day asking ourselves: 'what if the two sides were Rock and Fabric?'

(For those unfamiliar: 'rock or fabric?' is a question which originated in an Aftermath GM meeting and promptly became a society meme a few years ago. Everything is either rock or fabric. In this game...)

So what might Rock or Fabric want of their followers? Obviously, for everything in the world to be categorised as either Rock or Fabric, thus empowering the concepts further! That thought led us to the realisation that - as mentioned above - there are a lot of ways to divide characters and games and behaviour along certain lines - often, in fact, it forms the core conflict between characters. So maybe it would be fun to escalate up through various divides like these until we got to the most central, most important roleplaying divide of all: the IC/OC divide. Here we would like to quote from our original planning document, where you can see the amount of thought that went into this:

Four(?) 'acts'(?)

*Characters are in a strange world!
They arrive aligned to rock or fabric,
with some initial power-grabbing goal
briefed to them*

???

???

Breaking the IC/OC divide

Yes, we definitely knew what we were doing. The eventual categories for the four acts (which we did not tell players in advance) were:

Rock vs Fabric

Science vs Magic

Centre Stage vs Behind the Scenes

IC vs OC

As the game progressed, we briefed the players that the world seemed to be becoming more unstable as more characters and more concepts were poured into it. Players could also note for themselves that the alignments became more OC as the game went on.

Gameplay

For the first three acts, connection to one side or the other was expressed in two ways: at the start of the act, characters were asked to group on opposite sides of the room according to which concept their character felt more aligned with. Then, during the

act, we had envelopes on the GM desk marked up with the growing alignment grid between all of the categories presented so far, and characters were invited to commit item cards to specific envelopes to 'boost' the power of that alignment. We did originally intend for the balance between 'sides' to have mechanical effects, but in practice this never actually came to pass as the envelope contents were fairly evenly distributed at the various points we measured them. We were fine with this, because the envelopes were not really intended to be the focus of the game anyway, just a way for people to express their allegiance to categorisation.

For a game that was entirely based around nonsensical metaphysic, we knew it might be challenging to have a narratively satisfying ending. At the start of the fourth and final act, we did not brief the players about the opposing sides. Instead, we had one GM (Susannah) playing a character in with the rest of the PCs, and one GM simply OC as himself (James) behind the GM desk. In the middle of the IC area there was a 'singularity', represented by a bundled up piece of ribbon. Our plan for this was that it would naturally unfurl at some point towards the end of the act (whenever we judged something sufficiently chaotic and/or sufficiently OC had been done) to divide the room into IC and OC areas - a literal, physical manifestation of the IC/OC Divide. This would give the players a choice

of how to end the game: either go OC; try to destroy the IC/OC divide; or stay IC as PCs in the setting and claim it for themselves.

However, this plan changed as soon as players encountered the singularity, figured out what it was and immediately started poking it with some of the more metaphysical Items that characters had brought (since neither of us had played *Tempest*, *Omen* or *Work in Progress*, we were surprised by how many world-altering items characters from those games had brought along, such as 'A Giant Tear In Reality,' or 'The Tempest, an everlasting storm which imprisons metaphysical narrative')!

The IC/OC divide ribbon therefore rolled out right at the start of the final act, splitting the room in two and leading to one of the odder Time Freezes we've ever had to call ("Players on this side of the room: you are now Out Of Character!"). Players then had to physically cross the line to start or stop roleplaying again - either OC deciding to go IC again, or IC deciding they wanted to cease existing and let their 'player' take over again. This proved to be quite an asymmetric choice, causing problems for some characters/players. OC players could observe IC shenanigans but IC characters only had a vague awareness that the world on the other side of the divide existed and that maybe the 'real' person who had created them was there. Everyone

had very different takes on how both they and their characters reacted to this problem! In the end, a small number of characters chose to remain IC and, at Time Out, continued to exist in perpetuity in the strange world they had created.

Summary

As with all games, the nature of *Crossover* was a product of the way its GMs tend to think. We structured our game with a single underpinning metaphysic - "the dichotomies of roleplaying are empowered by our choices to buy into them" - and more or less let the entire narrative flow without guidance from there. You could do a similar thing with a strong underpinning narrative rather than a metaphysic, in which case you might allow players to define and construct mechanics and metaphysic as the game went along instead.

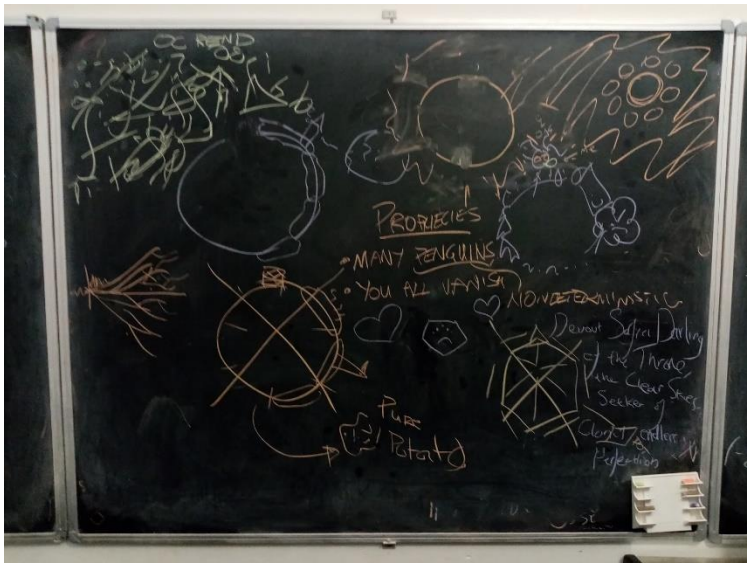
However you chose to approach this kind of concept, our one takeaway from the endless discussions we had about it would be to try to avoid any temptation to make the original character sheets or statistics mechanically meaningful. We think there is almost certainly no way to make one unified set of hard mechanics which would allow characters from every game to have fun - particularly if you allow characters from games that you as a GM did not play and have no knowledge of! We instead trusted our players to turn some of these apparently ridiculously unequal

interactions into narrative fun, and they delivered.

We had a lot of fun both creating and playing *Crossover*, and we hope our players did too. Hopefully this was an interesting overview both for those who were there, those who couldn't make it and those who weren't even in the society at the time!

Appendix

One delight of an in-person game: this extremely coherent Theories Blackboard, managed by the player who played four different versions of the same character across the four acts.



In Character Art for Romancing the Toaster –
Society Game MT 2020
EMU, played by Katie Moore

