

Interview with Professor Mike Perschon, MacEwan University

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Your dissertation focuses on understanding steampunk as an aesthetic that transcends media and genre. How did you become interested in steampunk and what lead you to pursue this research direction?

When I entered my PhD, one of the professors said, “You are not here to do your life’s work. You are here to get a degree – *then* you do your life’s work.” That was great advice, because it’s very easy for people to never finish their dissertation because they’ve become emotionally invested in it at some level of perfectionism. I had already chosen steampunk as my topic when I heard that advice, but it reinforced my decision. I first heard of steampunk when I was working on a paper on alternate history during my MA course work, when I read Steffan Hantke’s *I wish I could say I had some deep, rigorous purpose*, but the decision to pursue steampunk as a research direction was entirely mercenary. I was looking for something to study where there hadn’t been much done in the way of secondary literature, so I could be part of the first wave of scholarship on my topic. There was only one article on steampunk in the University of Alberta’s database in late summer of 2008, and when my thesis advisor for my MA said she’d sign on for my PhD if I did steampunk, it was a pretty easy decision. Plus, I had seen people writing dissertations on what I’d call more traditional topics while I was working on my MA, and they didn’t look like they were enjoying themselves. I figured steampunk would be a great way to make my mark *and* still be interested in the subject matter after 4-6 years.

Did you have difficulty getting your research direction to be taken seriously by the more traditional academic establishment? How did you work around, or through, that?

The advice that my PhD was not my life’s work, and my decision to write on steampunk gave me a thick skin – if people were dismissive of my chosen subject, I don’t recall caring all that much. I was making a career change for the sake of my family. My wife and I were raising a toddler and an infant when I started, and the toddler was in school and the infant in playschool by the time I was done. My agenda was to not be absent in their lives for very long, and steampunk kept me interested, engaged, and writing.

Thankfully, Comparative Literature is a very egalitarian discipline, so it wasn't the subject matter that was questioned as much as my approach. There were people who questioned me putting my initial research onto the *Steampunk Scholar* blog; I was regularly asked if I was worried someone would steal my ideas. I often replied that, so long as I'm properly cited, I was hoping people *would* steal my ideas. The irony is that it's that blog that opened up a wealth of opportunities, from publishing to presenting, which made my CV very shiny, and helped me land the position I have at MacEwan University.

Being a specialist in science fiction and fantasy, in steampunk in particular was really good for my academic career. I know this isn't always the case, but I've been really fortunate – I cannot recall having a significant moment where that choice was an impediment. My colleagues at MacEwan are very supportive of my research interests.

In addition to steampunk, one of your interests lies in tabletop role playing games (RPGs). How did you become interested in them and what about them has kept you playing for as long as you have?

I started playing *Dungeons and Dragons* in the early '80s after seeing advertisements that promised that it would be like writing a fantasy novel with my friends. I was really into Tolkien and Conan the Barbarian in those years, and *D&D* was just the perfect hobby for a hyper-creative kid with filmmaking aspirations. I grew up in a Baptist church and went on to be a youth minister for about 15 years, and that was back when fantasy roleplaying was, in all seriousness, considered Satanic. I nearly lost my job playing it with some of my youth in the '90s, and consequently spent my last years as a minister forming up an apologetic for why I played. I have all sorts of academic research and reasons for playing, but the bottom line is that I love it. It's no different than guys who rent ice time at 11 PM Friday night to play hockey – they are not professionals, they just enjoy it. Some guys shoot a puck around on frozen water, I roll dice. I also see it as performance art, and I love to perform. It's not done in front of an audience, but why should that matter? Our bi-weekly performances are like Buddhist sand paintings – there's a sense of impermanence, but it in no way diminishes the beauty of the art we create around the table.

Do you see yourself incorporating RPGs into the courses you teach? Which RPGs would be well suited? Do you have plans for a term-length course or just an addition to an existing course?

I had the opportunity to use an RPG in a course for the first time this last year, but I've been arguing for the teaching potential of RPGs since the early 90s. I wrote a very in-depth research paper on the use of RPGs in education during my undergraduate years, but anyone who has ever gamed can tell you that they players will learn everything they can about the universe you are gaming in. So you could teach history by gaming in the period you are investigating. Green Ronin press made this amazing source book on the Biblical world which included a sort of purity

chart for people gaming as Hebrews – it summarized the Levitical Law in a page. I guarantee a player who gamed as a Levite Priest would know Torah Law as well as a Rabbi in short order.

I used an RPG in a course on adaptation. We were looking at adaptations of *Lord of the Rings*, and instead of just talking about Tolkien's influence on fantasy gaming, I thought we'd experience it. So I set up a round-robin gaming table – 6 students playing while everyone else watched. Then we'd switch every 10-15 minutes. Everyone who wanted to, got a chance to experience it. I had really strong positive feedback on that class. I could see teaching an entire course on roleplaying as interactive narrative. In *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon speaks of "three modes of engagement," which could also be appropriated as three modes of narrative: telling (books), showing (films), and interacting (games). While academia has done a great job with the first, and a decent job in recent years with the second, it has yet to widely approve the study of the last. But fantasy RPGs afford a study that would encompass all three of those, tracing fantasy RPGs antecedents in Tolkien's writing, then Bakshi, Rankin-Bass, and Jackson's films, before culminating in a look at Iron Crown Enterprises' immersive *Middle-Earth Roleplaying* from the 1980s and '90s, and the wider influence of Tolkien on high fantasy RPGs like *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Pathfinder*.

I also see the potential of studying gaming books themselves, since adventure and campaign modules are interactive narratives that we read, which combines telling and interaction. Paizo's series of Adventure Paths would be particularly good for this, since they include short fiction and campaign details as well as a more straightforward adventure module.

Teaching an interactive narrative appears at first to be inherently difficult. What benefits and draw backs do you see to using RPGs in the classroom?

The benefit would be that the sort of subjective conversation one often sees in a literature course, where students treat the story world as a real place, and thus argue things like "The husband in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' might be a really nice guy – I don't trust this narrator!" go from being subjective solipsism to valuable speculation. I think the buy-in from students would increase. This would be especially true in high school history and social studies classes, where you could use historically based RPGs to teach moments in real-world history. I had an experience like this in high school. Because I was a pretty devout Baptist, I was asked to play the role of reformer Martin Luther in a roleplay of his trial. We nearly ended up with alternate history, where I changed the minds of my Catholic inquisition, because I studied *hard* to find out about Luther's issues with Catholicism. It's an experience I've never forgotten, and compared to other areas of history we studied, one that's remained with me.

I've also seen RPG campaign tools that are far more diverse than just fantasy or SF. There is a whole series of D20 Shakespeare adventures based on his plays from LPJ Design. Imagine studying *Othello* from within the story!

I honestly don't see any drawbacks to using RPGs in the classroom, save that there is the potential for a roleplay to take more class time than a lecture. I can explain what *Dungeons and Dragons* is in far less time that it takes me to run a game with students. But the retention of information is drastically increased in the hands-on experience. For an instructor of literature, there's so little opportunity for this kind of interaction. Reading a book is not like a chemistry lab, where one interacts with Bunsen burners and Erlenmeyer flasks – playing a roleplaying game is

more like a lab, but you cast Fireball and drink potions.

How do you see the interactive nature of RPGs contributing to (or potentially detracting from) the academic canon in the near future?

Interactive narratives are the biggest money makers now. Video games regularly outsell blockbuster films. The interactive narrative is the primary way many of our students receive narrative, which is why I think they are so interactive with passive fiction like film and text: “This is how it should have ended.” If we aren’t bringing the academic mind to bear on those narratives, we’re doing our students a disservice. That isn’t to say I think it should supplant the other modes of engagement, but there ought to be at least some attention paid to it. Now I’m mainly speaking of video games in this regard, but a course on video game RPGs demands a look at pen-and-paper RPGs as well.

At the very least, the inclusion of RPGs into the academic canon would help us to take ourselves less seriously, and I for one think that couldn’t be a bad thing. We could use a bit more play in our pedantic natures.

But as a gamer, I want to celebrate what I do as more than just mindless fun. There’s something serious and powerful in a good gaming session. It’s like oral storytelling. It doesn’t last. Unless you film or record every game you play, it’s more like a Buddhist sandpainting done as performance art – there is little to no record of what you did. But it is a really fascinating community experience, and one that deserves not only academic attention, since there are already good articles and books on the subject, but one that deserves academic sharing in the classroom. We all love to game, be it on a tabletop or a playing field. If sports can be an academic discipline, why not tabletop and video gaming?

Thank you very much, Mike!