Script – RPGs Are Not Movies

by Justin Alexander – June 25th, 2021

When we talk about roleplaying games, we often use examples from other mediums: Films, novels, comic books. The list goes on.

Which makes sense.

One of the problems with analyzing the artistic techniques of roleplaying games is that it’s difficult to establish common reference points: If I want to talk about what effective poetry looks like, I can hand you a copy of Shakespeare or Kipling or Amanda Gorman. If I want to talk about what a mediocre action blockbuster looks like, we can all stream the latest Michael Bay movie.

But when it comes to roleplaying games, things aren’t that simple. Even groups running identical scenarios, for example, won’t necessarily have similar experiences. And while the rise of actual play broadcasts has created an explosion in filmed game sessions for us to collectively analyze, these aren’t cultural touchstones yet.

So when we’re talking about roleplaying games, we often reach for examples from other mediums. I do it all the time. For example, in *The Principles of RPG Villainy* I used examples from *Die Hard* and *Dracula* to discuss common tropes and storytelling techniques used for villains.

This gives us a common reference point, but it also creates a trap: These other mediums are linear. Roleplaying games aren’t. Or, at least, they shouldn’t be.

So when we use films or books as fodder for our RPG discussions, it can be very easy for this linear nature to leak into the discussion.

For example, we know that Luke Skywalker is quote-unquote “destined” to go to the Death Star and blow it up because we’ve seen the movie. So if I talk about Obi-Wan Kenobi saying that he wants Luke to join him on Alderaan as an example of what a scenario hook looks like, am I saying that every scenario hook should be a scripted railroad with a predetermined outcome?

Well, if you’ve seen *Surprising Scenario Hooks* or *Running the Sandbox*, you know that’s not true.

But it’s an easy trap to fall into. After all, we’re surrounded by linear storytelling all the time. Inundated with it, really. It’s easy to think of linear storytelling as the default because it IS the default everywhere you look.

But when it comes to roleplaying games, it SHOULDN’T be. Roleplaying games are uniquely interactive and limitless in their narrative potential. We owe it to ourselves to embrace that, rather than sabotaging it by trying to force roleplaying games to look like films or books or graphic novels.

So when we look at these cross-medium examples, we have to be mindful of this risk.

I usually try to mitigate the problem by discussing outcomes that are different from those found in the original work: Maybe Luke *saves* the Death Star. Or Boromir succeeds in stealing the One Ring from Frodo. Or John Harker kills Dracula before he ever leaves Transylvania.

But we can still talk about Mos Eisley as an urbancrawl, the One Ring as a magical McGuffin, and Dracula as a memorable villain.

So if you see me using examples from other mediums when I’m talking about RPGs, try to keep in mind that – at least for the moment – we’re going to pretend that these stories *aren’t* linear experiences.

Even though, in reality, we know the outcome of every scene has been predetermined, we can still use the example of the scene (or the story) without embracing that predeterminism in our play.

If you’d like to see me using more of these examples of other media in the future, please like, comment, and subscribe. It’s not predetermined, but I’d sure appreciate it if you did. I’ll be leaving links to the other videos I’ve mentioned down below in the Font of All-Knowledge.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!