You Can Turn *Any* Story Into an RPG: A Gamer's Manifesto

by Bryan Caplan

I've been playing role-playing games (RPGs) for three decades. It all started with *Dungeons and Dragons* back in 1981. Before long, *D&D* was my number one interest – and stayed that way for about eight years. I spent hours every day revising rules, writing scenarios, and crafting imaginary worlds where my scenarios could unfold. During college and graduate school, my interest in RPGs waned. Over the last decade, however, I've rediscovered the hobby – and realized that it's much bigger and better than I imagined. Role-playing games aren't just another kind of game. They're an art form, on par with novels, or movies, or comics.

Comics? Indeed. In *Making Comics, Reinventing Comics*, and *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud laments the conflation of the *art form* of comics with the *genre* of superheroes. Historically, most American comic books tell stories about superheroes. But there's absolutely no reason why this should be so. You can tell *any* kind of story in comic form: family drama (*Fun House*, *Barefoot Gen*), horror (*The Walking Dead*, *From Hell*), crime (*Criminal*, *A History of Violence*), biography (*Maus*, *Ego & Hubris*), even stories about comic book collectors (*Wimbledon Green*). Of course, comic artists and writers have worked outside the superhero genre for a long time – especially beyond the U.S. But in recent decades – thanks in part to McCloud's influential works – the art form of comics has gotten a whole lot bigger and better.

My epiphany came when I realized that McCloud's thesis readily extends from comics to role-playing games. RPGs are an art form, not a genre. Historically, most role-playing games tell stories about magical medieval times; even when they leave the medieval world, they usually keep the magic. But there's absolutely no reason why this should be so. You can turn *any* kind of story into a role-playing game. And once you adopt this attitude, role-playing games are as boundless as imagination itself.

I'm well-aware, that non-magical, non-medieval RPGs have been around for a long time. But they remain marginalized – take a look at GenCon. And for the most part, gamers see non-magical, non-medieval games as a twist on *Dungeons and Dragons* – "We're fighting aliens/Indians/Nazis instead of orcs." I read a deeper significance into less traditional RPGs: They provide a glimpse of the infinite potential of the art form. You can turn any story into a novel. You

can turn any story into a movie. You can even turn any story into a comic. In the very same way, you can turn any story into an RPG.

During the 90s, I virtually stopped playing RPGs. The main reason was boredom. *Dungeons and Dragons* fascinated me for years, but the thrill wore off with adulthood. What rekindled my love of RPGs was the McCloudian vision. Suddenly I started to see playable stories everywhere. Over the last decade, I've written and GMd stories about high school horror, Lemony Snicket's Baudelaire orphans, average Washington DC residents during a social collapse, misdiagnosed mental patients in a psychiatric hospital, ancient Babylon, and the mysterious persistence of 6% real estate commissions. As Arnold Schoenberg put it, "Because: Art means New Art."

But how exactly do you go about turning a story into an RPG? There are hundreds of rules systems on the market, so you could just shop around on a case-by-case basis to find the most suitable rules for the story you want to tell. But in practice, this is a huge barrier to entry. Learning multiple sets of rules well enough to smoothly GM is hard. And making your players learn a new set of rules for every story is a heavy tax.

The natural alternative is to turn to a "generic" RPG. There are several on the market, but the one that influenced me the most was the *HERO System*. This generic has a great origin story. In the beginning, the game was just *Champions*, the world's first superhero RPG. But after a few years, the game designers came to a great insight: *If you can model superheroes, you can model **anything**.*[1]

At first, spin-off games like *Fantasy Hero* and *Danger International* borrowed lots of rules from *Champions* rather than adopting them wholesale. But by the time I started RPGing seriously again, *Champions* had morphed into the fully generic *HERO System*, with genre books on Dark Champions (modern action stories), Pulp (campy adventure in the 1920s and 30s), sci-fi, and much more. I spent several years using the HERO engine to run increasingly unconventional RPGs.

Over time, though, *HERO* felt like more and more of a chore. The concept of a generic system is great. The genre books are great. But the system itself is insanely byzantine. My regular players barely understood it after years of play. New players were invariably baffled. And forget about teaching *HERO* to kids! By the time my oldest sons were six, they were dying to RPG with me. I had to find a simpler, more intuitive system.

In my search, I came across a superhero RPG called *Mutants and Masterminds*. I liked it right away: simple, intuitive, and beautifully written. But I didn't actually play it for a few years. I'd written a bunch of *HERO* scenarios and didn't feel like converting them. Still, the *Champions-HERO* metamorphosis kept coming back

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[1] See "The Heroes Speak" in *Champions: 25th Anniversary Edition*.

to me. *M&M* was such an elegant superhero game – and to repeat, the great lesson of *Champions* is: *If you can model superheroes, you can model* **anything***.*

Ultimately I made the break. With a few modifications, I used *M&M* rules to run a sci-fi game for my then-seven-year-olds, set in the *Star Frontiers* universe. We all loved it – and my boys were able to actually learn the rules. As we played, I wound up revising more and more of the system. The elegance of *M&M* was an inspiration to me; whenever I saw a chance to make the game even more elegant, I took it.[2] Before long, I used my revised *M&M* rules to start a sprawling time travel conspiracy game. Story and system came together beautifully. And for the first time in years, my adult players – Ph.D. economics students all – managed to learn the rules. Elegance isn't just beautiful; it's functional.

I've attached the latest version of my House Rules. I walk through the entire 2nd edition of the *Mutants and Masterminds* rulebook, and try to improve it section by section.[3] In my mind, I've turned *M&M* into the generic game that Green Ronin's *True20* should have been. I hasten to add that I'm standing on the shoulders of giants. Your mileage may vary; if you hate my changes, peace. But if your vision of RPGs as an art form resembles mine, I suspect you'll like what I've done.

My main changes:

- *M&M* wisely begins with *D&D*'s classic six abilities: Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity, Constitution, and Charisma. Then it creates separate Attack and Defense traits, but leaves damage and initiative dependent on Strength and Dexterity, and makes saves dependent on Wisdom, Dexterity, and Constitution. I decided to fully bifurcate Abilities from Combat and Saves, and make players pay separately for each.

- *M&M* advertises its combat system as "fast and furious," but it still has too much bookkeeping for me. I decided to give every character a Life characteristic with a default of 2 – and take advantage of the *M&M* step-function mechanic where the effects of a failed save get worse if you fail your save by more.

- *M&M*'s carrying capacity tables, jumping and throwing rules, and Leaping and Super-Strength powers are needlessly inelegant. I scrapped these rules in favor of three Strength-based skills – Lift, Jump, and Throw and base difficulties on the Progression Table.

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[2] I can't quite remember when I noticed that Green Ronin, the publisher of *M&M*, had already written a generic version, called *True20*. Great name, but the execution disappointed me. Instead of just transforming *M&M* into a generic RPG, they created a new game with some overlapping mechanics.

[3] In the meanwhile, Green Ronin came out with a 3rd edition of *M&M* which – unfortunately from my perspective – takes a big step away from the elegance of the 2nd edition.

- *M&M*'s long list of Action Descriptions strikes me as inelegant overkill. Are all my players really supposed to learn how an Overrun works? I kept a few core Actions, turned the cool ones into Feats, and dropped the rest.

- I borrowed quite a few Powers, Extras, Flaws, and Feats from the *HERO System*. *M&M*'s saving throw mechanic meshes nicely with e.g. *HERO*'s degrees of Mind Control.

- To the delight of all my players young and old, I designed moderately crunchy Critical Hit and Fumble Tables.

I freely admit that I haven't surveyed the whole field of generic RPGs. I've read *GURPS* books, but never played. I may be missing an even better system. But for the foreseeable future, I'll be using my *True20* House Rules to see how many novel stories they can bring to life. Why shouldn't there be RPGs in the spirit of *Seinfeld*, *The Big Lebowski*, or *The Sopranos*? Why shouldn't there be RPGs that transcend genre – that *give* inspiration to novels, movies, and comics instead of merely drawing it?

All you need to RPG are rules and imagination. In purely technological terms, then, RPGs could have arisen thousands of years ago. Imagine how vast our gaming libraries would be today if people started writing RPGs in the time of Socrates. Picture the canon of transcendent classics that library would contain! We can't undo the oversight of the past. But the gamers of the present can and should make up for lost time.

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