

## Genre ramblings

TUESDAY, MARCH 8TH, 2022

Two weeks ago, we held a Trait Vote in our game of Burning Locusts. It is well-documented here<sup>1</sup>, but there is a particular point I want to expand upon as it relates to something that I think role-playing games do very well, even if there is a strong trend against it in the industry. During the vote, we hit a place where the thesaurus could not help describe the changes that happened to the characters. The characters have evolved into something complex enough that we have had to resort to using phrases instead of single words. In other words, we've entered uncharted territory.

<sup>1</sup> Trait Vote Sessions in Burning Wheel (<https://takeonrules.com/2022/03/01/trait-vote-sessions-in-burning-wheel/>)

I've seen a lot of cultural changes during my trips around the sun. I've witnessed the birth of video games, hip-hop, techno music, computer animation, the web, smartphones, and on and on and on. These were all life changing events that we now take for granted. (I've also seen many things I love disappear only to be displaced or replaced by something inferior). None of these things were created in a vacuum. But all of them were paradigm shifts that required a big cognitive leap. It is easy to trace a lineage from innovation to innovation when looking backwards but it would have been impossible for someone looking forward to predict those changes. Those things might not have happened at all or they might have happened differently. In each case, someone walked off the map, and the cartographers had to append to the map to keep it accurate.

I've seen the maps change over and over again. I don't want my possibilities to be limited. Strict genre emulation, re-enactment, and fan fiction don't put me in that exploratory space. I am not interested in this kind of fan participation in genres (down to specific expressions of genre via licensed properties). This kind of participation treats walking off the map as a failure state.

Genres *can* serve as a familiar starting place because it is hard for us to conceive of something that doesn't exist yet. But when we invent or discover something entirely novel, the world grows, even by an infinitesimal amount (as it did in our Trait Vote). I think that's desirable, even when we start off in someone else's world. Genre is a bigger unit of change than what happened in our game, but it is built upon these tiny atoms that we create when the thesaurus fails us. Repeat this enough times at the correct scale, and a new genre will emerge, even ephemerally and without an audience or critics to codify it. But I think that works better as a side-effect rather than as an explicit goal.

Like many other gamers, I have spent my whole life obsessing over books, comics, music, video games, film, television, and RPGs. If I find a place in play that I've never been to before, that place is bound to be pretty interesting.

I want to know where the map ends and how to recognize when that has happened. I want to know how to resist the instinct to course-correct back into familiar and safe territory. I also want to set up conditions where this exploration is allowed and not judged as a failure state.