

By the WAY #18

by W. Andrew York
(wandrew88 of gmail.com)

Reminder - May 3 is Free Comic Book Day - Check Your Local Distributor for Details
Note - Red 5 Comics is supplying a special issue featuring new Atomic Robo and Neozoic stories!!

Wow, I've been busy over the past few weeks. In fact, I've only had the opportunity get go poolside once to begin working on my summer tan. It was only for about 1 1/2 hours; but, I got a nice shade of red - not enough to burn, but a start. Now, if I can only get out here for a couple of hours this weekend...

I'm not really a "tanning" person, or anything like George Hamilton. For most of my life, I only spent time in the sun when playing outside with friends. Most of the time, I'd read a book inside or otherwise keep in the shade. Over the past few years, with my push to reduce use of air conditioning, I've gone outside and set in the sun to acclimate and to get a bit of tan. I will say, most of the time I am reading; but, instead of inside, I'm outside and usually in the sun. Alternately, I'll get into the pool and lean on the edge while reading. Of course, I have to be mindful of the water - kids playing, water polo splashing and the wind spraying.

And, on the plus side, either at the pool or setting outside my apartment reading, has allowed me to meet and get to know some of my neighbors and other folks in the apartment complex. This is something I've missed in some apartments where the folks were insular, keeping to themselves and, at most, say 'Hi' to in passing. Being part of a community is much better than living, isolated, in a building with non-descript neighbors.

Commentary

I'm putting strong hopes that the new Star Trek movie, due out in May 2009, will reenergize the franchise and bring the rich world Roddenberry created back for new ideas, new stories and plenty of entertainment. It'll take some work, after the overexposure of The Next Generation/Deep Space 9/Voyager and a movie all airing in the mid-90s, followed by the weaker Enterprise series (though I did like it). They also have the hurdle of jumping back and all but restarted beloved characters at the beginning of their careers.

However, similar things have been done. Ronald Moore, coming out of the Star Trek environment, has reshaped the Battlestar Galactica storyline in ways that all but the most devoted of the original series fans can say is a vast improvement and, even while still in production, has entered the Sci-Fi hall of fame as a classic series with extraordinarily strong writing, acting, production values and – most importantly – extremely entertaining.

Another "classic" that has been brought out fresh and newly minted is the Dr. Who franchise. On hiatus for roughly fifteen years, with only one TV movie to keep it alive, it returned under Russell Davies to what is a true rebirth of the concept. On top of that, two successful series have spun off (Torchwood and The Sarah Jane Adventures) which, unlike the Star Trek immersion of the '90s, are fresh and separate enough that they balance one another without seeming to be the same stories, just a different ship and crew.

J.J. Abrams has the chance to follow these two successful examples of how to take a concept that seems old and reinvigorate it for both old and new audiences (even, as this'll be the second time it's come back from cancellation). He may find it too soon to resurrect, as the others had, for the most part, been out of circulation for more than a decade rather than just four years. However, Abrams is one of the folks that can accomplish this – and let's hope that in a year, we're all in line to see a highly rated blockbuster that'll bring back Trek!

Texas Spotlight

Most of you probably have seen the Dolly Parton movie "Best Little Whorehouse in Texas". Considering Doug Kent's letter below, it should be noted that it is truly "based on a real story". Over the years, prostitution in Texas wasn't officially condoned, but was prevalent and tolerated until recently.

In the case of the movie, it drew the story line from the legendary Chicken Ranch - where, for most of its existence, a chicken could defray the cost of a visit. According to [Texas: A Modern History](#) by David G. McComb,

the ranch was founded in 1844 and only shut down in 1973, making it the longest continually running enterprise in its field. The events involving the closing of the brothel inspired the movie. Interestingly, some of the scenes were actually shot inside the state capitol building.

During the world wars, the trade was very active around the large number of military installations in the State. I've been told that, in a number of Texas cities, you could buy a guide at the railroad station to the local red light district. However, there were limits on where it was allowed. While working as a police officer, there was one arrest of a woman who's criminal history showed a number of charges of trespassing onto San Antonio military installations for illicit purposes during the early '40s.

I'm sure the practice hasn't disappeared from the Texas landscape; but, one-stop institutions such as the Chicken Ranch are long gone - even if the latest Harold & Kumar movie includes one in east Texas run by Beverly D'Angelo.

Happy 75th Birthday to Willie Nelson (April 30)

LOCs

Send them in!

Doug Kent: Ah, but historical facts ARE constantly changed. Especially when Hollywood is involved.

Braveheart is still one of my top 100 movies...but how much of it is accurate? Almost zero. Yet the film knows the audience won't bother to check, or care.

Fargo, another one of my top 100, says it is based upon a true story, when that was actually just a method the Coen Brothers used to make the audience feel more realistic emotion about the characters.

The list could go on and on, but it isn't just "Hollywood" - its the government system too. And has always been. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, anyone? Hitler's assertion (complete with bodies) that the Poles attacked Germany? Urban legend and fiction mix with truth so easily. Wag the dog...when you tell a lie often enough, it becomes truth.

I may have digressed a bit from the original topic, but so what? Just wait a few months and I can claim I said something else...

[WAY] Well, as this is in print, I think you'll be held to what you've written. Too bad it wasn't just a phone call..... But, your first point is somewhat true - when you enter the realm of fiction, facts are bendable and forgettable as long as the story is interesting. But, fiction is fiction. The underlying facts, however, are unchanged and in a non-fiction setting should not be ignored or otherwise dismissed.

Regarding the movie Fargo, saying it is "based" on a real story automatically puts it into a fictional setting. That means that any disagreeable fact can be safely ignored, or in this case, the fiction began with that untruthful statement.

From my point of view, with the statement "when you tell a lie often enough, it becomes truth" I would insert two words and, then, agree with it: "when you tell a lie often enough, it becomes the perceived truth" (I might even go with "accepted" in place of "perceived"). However, the underlying facts have not changed.

[Jim-Bob] Dear Andy,

I'm really happy that you're keeping up a narrative thread to TAP in *By the WAY*. #17 was particularly fun to read for a number of reasons, most enviously in your improving weather. As I write today, Spring has finally sprung in New England and we usually move straight on to summer in a few weeks. Though my summer camp in Maine is still surrounded by two feet of snow. I'm going to try to drive in to it the first Saturday of May and hope I can make it without "hiking in".

[WAY] From what I'm seeing on the weather front, snow should be long gone in your neck of the woods by now. I hope you enjoy your weekend off.

[Jim-Bob] I also love all the Texas history tidbits. You know, of course, that I was born in El Paso, Texas, so I am a real live native Texan (why I like to hang onto the Jim-Bob moniker I picked up when I lived in Dallas for that year in the early 1980's, the only time I remember living in Texas). And native Texans need to know their history!!!

[WAY] Hmmm, if I'd heard that you were a native Texan, I'd completely forgotten it. Interesting how folks' paths cross in different ways. As most folks know, I'm a Michigander (or Michigander) by birth and lived there the first 23+ years of my life. However, I've now lived in Texas over half my life (yes, I'm 47) and consider

myself a true Texan. And, if your memory of Texas is solely Dallas, you're probably better for that. El Paso is not known as the garden spot of the state - the few times I've had flights stop there it has looked pretty bleak.

[Jim-Bob] I also wanted to comment a bit on the red light traffic cameras, they are all around the intersections near my house in Providence. I've avoided getting any tickets from them, but Rhode Island is a big "if there's less than a car length as the light is turning red, follow on through" state. I would expect that we also would meet what I understand are the national statistics, exhibiting a dramatic increase in rear end collisions from other drivers stopping short. I've only seen one of those myself so far though. And outsourcing in all government in the US, unfortunately, is a way of paying off campaign donors with contracts. The most egregious ones I've heard about are the contracts to do background checks after 9/11 on government employees. Go see employeeclearance.com for some background and only somewhat biased commentary....

[WAY] Here in Texas, there has been a big push to outsource and privatize government. My work life has been heavily involved with a continuing data center outsourcing (over the past two and a half years). Texas is also having an ongoing dialogue about outsourcing toll roads, including the Trans-Texas Corridor (which also includes debate on the use of eminent domain) - maybe a subject for a future column.

[Jim-Bob] I also was quite disappointed by the Spiderwick Chronicles, wasting some pretty good actors with lame special effects. The whole second half of the movie was almost unwatchable, I'm surprised you gave it a B-. I wish people would learn how to use special effects capabilities intelligently and in a balanced way, but it will take time, and us movie audiences complaining. Did anyone like the over-the-top last battle in Spiderwick, really?

[WAY] I've never read the book, so it was completely new to me. I do agree that the actors were above the caliber of the movie and that the last battle was overdone. However, I think kids would enjoy the movie as a whole and, so, I edged my rating up a bit. From solely an adult viewpoint, I'd probably have given it a "C".

Review

"Grey Ranks" is an independently produced RPG released last year. I only found out about it when I picked up my weekly batch of comics on "New Comic Book Day" (Wednesdays). I was chatting with Nick, one of the staff at my local gaming store - Dragon's Lair - while paying for the comics and he mentioned that the store had, at his urging, stocked some niche RPGs. After his description of them, I went to the "New Games" section and checked some of them out. This one grabbed my immediate attention due to the historical setting.

The premise of the RPG is that the players represent teenagers (15, 16 or 17 years old) at the time of the Warsaw Uprising against the Nazi occupation in 1944. In four-member groups grown out of the pre-war youth organizations (Boy Scouts and Girl Guides), they experience the 63-day period leading into and through the Uprising. The characters experience war, family, camaraderie, death, love, grief, fear, triumph, defeat and, ultimately, failure.

The make-up of the RPG is not what most folks would expect. There are only four players - and no GM. It is structured into a 10 "chapter" game to be played over three gaming sessions. Each of the chapters is themed, but the action is free-form involving a series of mission and personal scenes for each character. The only die rolling is at the end of each scene and chapter to determine the character's and the group's success.

The heart of the game strongly emphasizes the individual player's ability to role-play and to weave a story. Each character has a general background, a motivation (in the game, called "the thing held dear"), a reputation and a mental/emotional state (tracked on a grid). As the characters move from chapter to chapter, their background fills out, their motivation may become threatened, their reputation is used while influencing scenes and their mental/emotional state moves on the grid based on successes and failures in the personal and mission scenes. These changes alter the character and, in turn, challenge the skills of the player to role-play correctly.

Scenes are created by the players in an ad-lib fashion. Each is primed by a hook (object, event, non-player character, emotion, etc) which the player weaves into his narrative. The scenes can be intermixed, one breaking into the middle of another, interweaving elements from all the characters and the world around them. And, the characters can die. In that event, the players continue in the game as, even in death, the characters contribute to the game and make appearances in flash-backs or dreams.

As a disclaimer, this is not a "G" rated RPG. Prior to the start of the game, the four players are strongly encouraged to discuss boundaries and limits on what will be prohibited during the game and what may not be brought in, but handled "off stage" by reference - not detailed in the scenes. How to establish this is well documented and demonstrated within the rules.

It must be remembered that this is a brutal period of time with all sorts of atrocities and horrors occurring every day, exemplified by shorts in the book detailing the narrative of real individuals involved in those events. The

game designer is interested in the players experiencing it; but, only to the level they are comfortable. As an aside, the Holocaust is not the central point of this game. It is happening, and some scenes may incidentally involve related events; but, this is the story of the Polish Uprising.

I am very intrigued by the RPG and I'm looking at how to PBM it here (obviously, a PG version with much graphic content off stage). I would be the publisher/editor of the scenes/narratives, rather than a traditional GM. Depending on the length of submissions, I might have to condense or collapse individual narratives for space concerns.

As you can guess, I like this game (unplayed, as of yet) and the new, to me, style of RPGing. Overall, this particular game is more of a learning experience game rather than a campaign setting or an escapist one-shot. The final chapter involves closing out the surviving character's lives and their future. Additionally, the players are encouraged to debrief, discuss their experiences and bring out issues and/or highlights.

For more information, check out www.bullypulpitgames.com.

Movie Watch: Horton Hears a Who B+; Leatherheads B-; The Counterfeiters B+; Dark Matter B; Forgetting Sarah Marshall C-; Forbidden Kingdom C+; Harold & Kumar: Escape from Guantanamo Bay D+

Observation

I'm going to have to plan better next year. On April 15, I went to the post office around 9pm to get my mail. That post office closes at 6:30pm; but, there were nearly a dozen folks trying to mail their income tax returns (for those outside the US, income tax returns have to be postmarked by April 15). They had no idea where the main post office was (it remained open until midnight for late filers) nor had they listened to the TV news reports nor read the newspaper, each reporting the closing times of various post offices.

I figure next year, I can set up a stand to charge \$5 or \$10 for a map to the central post office. Over the course of the evening, I probably can take in at least \$100 from those who wait until the literal last minute to send in their returns. For the record, I sent in my return (with a check for what I owed) early in April.

Playlist for this issue: Local Fox Nightly News, American Idol Results Show, Dr. Who "Voyage of the Damned"; Bones "Player Under Pressure"; Torchwood "Ghost Machine"; Hanson "The Walk"; Dixie Chicks "Taking the Long Way" Journey "Escape"

=====GAME SECTION=====

On *TAP*:

A new "Everyone Plays" game (Open to Anyone at Any Time!)
Metropolis (4-5 players wanted) - rules available upon request
Tombouctou (3-5 players wanted) - rules available upon request
Grey Ranks (4 players wanted) - rules required, ask at a local game store or try
www.bullypulpitgames.com. PB(E)M rules under development
Let me know what else you're interested in seeing here.....(sorry, we're out of Czech Rebel)

OK - I've not found the ruleset I've been looking for to start the "everyone plays" game (not much time recently).
Next time I hope!

Submit Email entries and comments to [wandrew88 of gmail.com](mailto:wandrew88@gmail.com) or
by mail to W Andrew York; POB 201117; Austin TX 78720-1117

Deadline is: November 15, 2008 at high noon Central Time