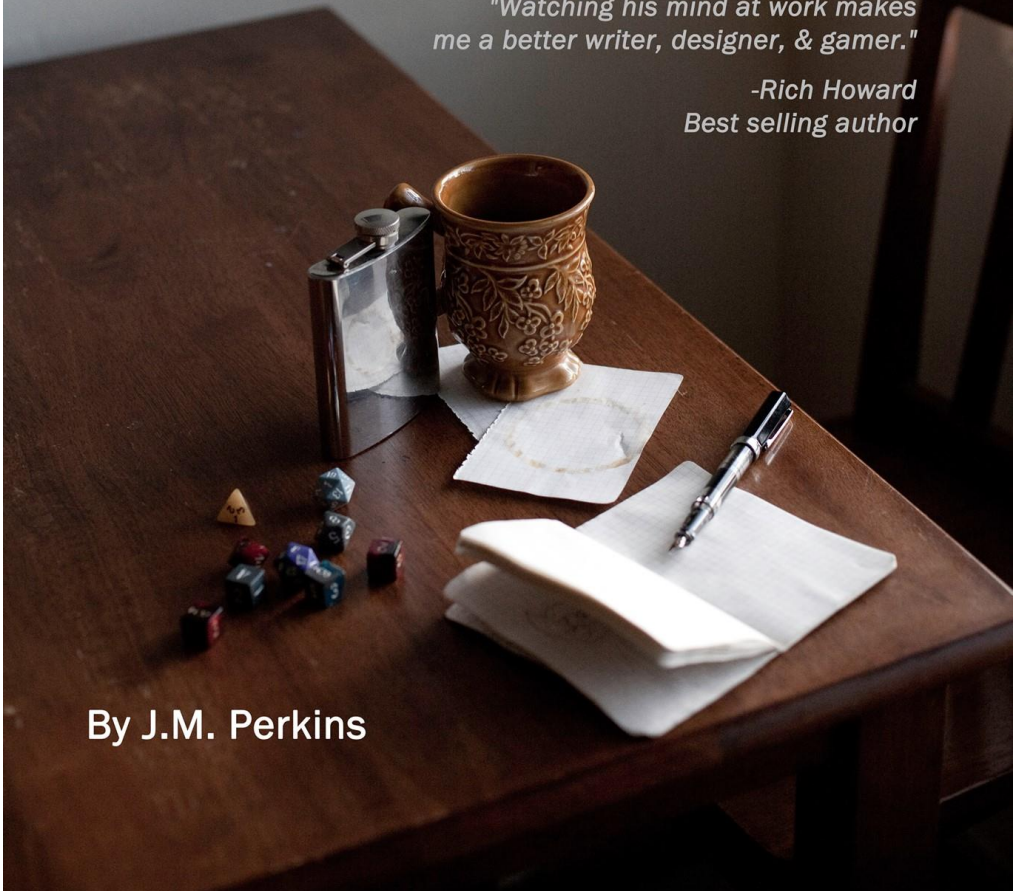# DESIGN NOTES

Essays and advice on game design, world-building, and crafting fiction

*"Watching his mind at work makes me a better writer, designer, & gamer."*

*-Rich Howard*
*Best selling author*

By J.M. Perkins

# DESIGN NOTES

*Essays & Advice on Game Design, World-Building, and Crafting Fiction*

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Design Notes: Essays & Advice on Game Design, World-Building, and Crafting Fiction

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# CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

What you hold in your hands is a collection of essays about my process, design thoughts, and thematic considerations regarding the creation and publication of my Campaign Setting 'The City of Salt in Wounds.' My goal is to inform, amuse, and communicate some of the realities of being a writer-designer-publisher. I would create a longer, more comprehensive introduction that derives some deeper meaning from the work, but the truth is I need to get back to actually doing the work rather than commenting upon and contextualizing the work I'm doing.

Hope you enjoy. As for me, I need to get back to writing/editing/designing/publishing.

-J.M. Perkins 2016.11.13

# FANTASY FLAVOR

Fantasy generally and fantasy tabletop RPGs in particular are dominated by the legacy of J.R.R. Tolkien. Exceptions abound, but when most people hear about 'fantasy' fictions they envision a vaguely European feudal society with dragons, a core complement of races, and usually some clearly delineated color or design differentiated 'armies of darkness.'

None of this is bad. In fact, it is all *awesome* (hence the ubiquity). The imagery speaks to so many of us so deeply, and we have not yet even begun to tell all the amazing tales we can create with this storyteller's palette of tropes. Moreover, it is an extremely useful device in roleplaying games in that it allows players to 'know', or at least be able to make an educated guess, about what a dwarf or an elf is before they begin playing. Many players have no desire to read pages of explanation about a wholly alien race or culture before they start to get an idea as to how their character might act in a given situation (although some players *really* enjoy this and navigating this dichotomy is one of the themes I touch upon in [Designing for Different Types of Fun](#)).

That said, we as game players and game makers can and should expand the realm of fantasy. More compellingly, I believe this is vitally important for anyone who wants to make their game setting a commercial project. If you want to make a setting *just* like Tolkien's Middle-earth with a few cosmetic tweaks (names and the like), by all means go

forth and get your geek on. But if you do this, I as a player would wonder why we aren't just playing in Middle-earth, and I as a buyer of games would wonder why I should shell out money when the concept has probably been done better.

Likewise, if I wanted standard 'Fantasy Kitchen Sink', I'd turn to 'Golarion' by Paizo; if I wanted Conanesque hyperborean fantasy, I'd turn to 'Primeval Thule' by Sasquatch Games, and so on. Personally, I'm much more interested in making and playing the games that have a distinct 'flavor', whether that's Sigil/Planescape, Eberron, or Dark Sun. Also, all of these setting have an easy elevator pitch that explains the sorts of stories that happen there and how this is differentiated from play in 'standard fantasy.'

Put another way, I'm most interested in playing and enjoying the games/settings only *I* or *you* could make, and this generally means everything that isn't a retread of Tolkien.

My advice to aspiring makers of fantasy settings is the same advice I've tried to follow with the development of Salt in Wounds & Synoma: don't recreate the 'standard.' When you do utilize tropes, help your players and game masters see these conventions in a new light. Go big, go fantastic, but ground your work in a sense of people struggling with relatable goals—the needs for food, for shelter, for protection or defeat of an enemy, love of family, quests for power or regard, or rarely, transcendence–no matter how alien the culture or race.

Lastly, do the *extremely* hard work of being able to explain in a sentence or two the central conceit of your work, imply the wondrous (and unique) adventures that can take place there, and leave the listener/reader/potential customer begging to learn more by joining your game or buying your book.

# FANTASY & VERISIMILITUDE

*Two Ways of 'Grounding' Fantastical Fiction*

While it's a truism to say that designing a city around the never-ending butchery of a giant, magical, dinosaur monster (as I've done in the Salt in Wounds Campaign Setting) is utterly fantastic, the real failure of imagination would be to suggest that simply having a wondrous setting absolves a writer of considering verisimilitude or otherwise divorcing the work from issues of the real world/real people (even if those issues are refracted through an odd lens of magic). There are two primary ways I ensure that some 'real world' considerations echo through Salt in Wounds and help make it 'believable.'

First, I start any piece of writing with the idea that every character wants something: ultimately, you can create a crazy-weird-bizarre world by grounding it through understandable characters. The most important way to make characters (even inhuman characters in a fantastical setting) is to make it clear what they want. Every character I write for Salt in Wounds, at their core, wants something, and the tangle of cross-purposes is where the story comes from. Magic, even titanic, reality-warping magic can still feel 'real' if wielded by or affecting characters who have an exceptionally clear vision of what they want and what they're willing (or not willing) to do to get it.

Second, every problem I write about was usually the solution to some other problem. For instance, the rampaging Tarrasque was a problem 'solved' by binding it in place and slaughtering it endlessly, which caused the Tarrasque's magical blood to begin destabilizing the environment, which was 'solved' by the creation of the Heartsblood Marsh, which might ultimately end up being a bigger problem than the Tarrasque ever was. People mutating horribly from eating improperly processed Tarrasque flesh is a problem caused by people looking for a solution to the problem of famine... and so on and so forth. I'm not so cynical as to suggest or design from the perspective that there aren't 'real' solutions (by which I mean simply solutions that solve more problems than they create) but I do enjoy writing under the assumptions that 'real' solutions are: rare, hard, and expensive, and so without actual heroism these real/difficult solutions will almost always be ignored in favor of the easy/false solutions (which end up costing so much more ultimately).

Those are my two most commonly used 'hacks' to try to ensure that Salt in Wounds 'feels real,' and both go hand in hand with my tricks to empower my work by plugging into my real-world fears and anxieties.

# REAL LIFE THEMES

*Incorporating my anxieties into Salt in Wounds*

There are two concepts that I'm consistently bringing into (my) mind while I write Salt in Wounds. The first is factory farming. I'm an active carnivore, and while I don't ultimately see anything morally wrong with eating animals in *ideal* circumstances, the industrial-scale torture to which we subject animals horrifies me and this is one of the issues our descendants will judge us harshly for I believe (though, at least for now, has not compelled me to stop buying bacon). I take the suffering of millions of animals and refract it through a fantasy lens to focus on one creature that simply won't die. As a corollary, the way we practice factory farming (which involves the administration of obscene amounts of antibiotics) is a huge contributing factor in the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria that has the potential to cause untold amounts of human misery. This I contrast with the plagues and pathogens brewing in Salt in Wounds.

The other issue is the historical (and still ongoing) development of the petrochemical industry as a parallel to the revolution around the harvest of the Tarrasque. When not writing Salt in Wounds, I work for one of the largest chemical companies in the world and I'm keenly aware that it is the endless subdivisions & rearrangements of oil and other fossil fuels that has basically made the modern chemical industry (with the endless myriad of plastics and other specialized materials). I try to reinterpret this as

the alchemical renaissance Salt in Wounds is experiencing. We make damn near everything out of plastic, much as the various bone-smiths & alchemists are learning to make almost everything from Tarrasque viscera. More to the point, the first world in large part 'solved' the problem of famine via the implementation of gas powered powered farm machinery and transportation infrastructure. The cost—for Salt in Wounds as well as for us—is poisoning our water tables, the ocean, and the climate. You can see this with everything from fracking to oil spills to potentially creating a global-level threat via climate change (and global levels threats could happen in game due to any of the nastier outcomes possible for Salt in Wounds… we'll have to see how the Player Characters handle that part of the Adventure Path).

But those are some of the things I'm thinking about as I write Salt in Wounds and try to improve my fiction (and its verisimilitude) by darkly mirroring some aspects of our world.

# THE SIZE OF THE TARRASQUE

*How Many People It Could Feed?*

When I started writing Salt in Wounds, the evil mega-city fed by the perpetual butchery of an endlessly regenerating giant monster, I officially left the size of its Tarrasque (aka the giant monster) somewhat vague[1] in order to allow GMs to tell different stories about it. Even so, I wanted to take a minute and share some 'back of the envelope' calculations regarding the size of the Tarrasque and what sort of population it could conceivably sustain.

Officially, for non-Salt in Wounds use, the Pathfinder SRD defines a Tarrasque as a 'colossal' creature, meaning it is 64 feet (20 meters) long or more. For reference, we'll just guess that the Tarrasque is as large as the largest earth animal–the blue whale–at around 82 feet (30 meters).

Using this calculation and comparison to blue whales, we can also get a sense of how big the Tarrasque needs to be in order to sustain (more or less) a city the size of Salt in Wounds. I've stated that Salt in Wounds has a population of around 55,000. Supposing that the city sustains itself

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[1]Currently, I envision the Salt in Wounds Tarrasque much bigger than colossal, actually something more akin to Godzilla in size. Godzilla has varied in size over the years, but let's take an average of around 300 ft (90 meters). If I understand the cube-square law well enough to make a guess about weight (which I don't), we could ballpark the Salt in Wounds Tarrasque as weighing (or at least having as much volume) as twelve blue whales, or 5,040,000 pounds!

on a purely carnivorous diet, and eats well, that means every citizen eats around 2 pounds of meat a day for a total 110,000 pounds of meat each and every day.

Would the default Tarrasque be able to provide that if it were bound up and perpetually butchered? Yes, definitely.

Blue whales (the aforementioned animal we're using for a size comparison) weigh upwards of 420,000 pounds. Even assuming that some of that weight is undesirable for consumption (bones, elimination organs, whatever) and even leaving enough of the body intact that the harpoons continue to hold it in place, that still leaves 150,000 pounds of meat every harvest vs the 110,000 pounds needed to sustain the population. The Tarrasque could provide this every day, assuming that it took an entire day to regenerate—although it doesn't take an entire day to regenerate.

The default Pathfinder Tarrasque can regenerate 40 hit points a round (or six seconds). HP regeneration probably doesn't translate directly to 'meat extraction regrowing' but given that the default Tarrasque has 525 hp we could assume it can completely regenerate its body every 14 minutes. Or, let's be more pessimistic; let's say having ¼ of your body cut out represents truly massive, beyond-death-type damage which we could translate to the Tarrasque being reduced to -525 hp. In that case, the Tarrasque can regenerate 150,000 pounds of meat every 28 minutes. If you had a team working tirelessly, this means that, given the Pathfinder default Tarrasque, you

could produce approximately 7,200,000 pounds of meat every day.

As such, Salt in Wounds (whatever the size of its Tarrasque may be) is nowhere *near* capacity as far as a population it could sustain. Even imagining all kinds of inefficiencies/problems, if we're even vaguely correct, a colossal, regenerating Tarrasque could feed over 3 million people. As such, the city of Salt in Wounds can easily afford to dump, waste, and export millions of pounds of meat[2].

If Salt in Wounds featured the default Pathfinder Tarrasque (which it doesn't officially, unless you/your GM wants it to) the biggest challenge facing the God-Butchers and Marrow Miners is not harvesting enough meat, but rather harvesting enough meat fast enough that the wounds they make to extract flesh don't close in to trap or suffocate them.

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[2] Given the recent disasters, I imagine that it's sometimes popular for the aristocracy of the city to blame disasters (like the 12th Meridian Crisis and the creation of the 'no man's land' of the Tail Stones) on the increased demands for meat represented by a swelling population. This is wholly false; the issues/failures have always entirely been due to a push to extract more alchemically valuable glands or other occult tissue.

# ON THE WORD BLOOD

When designing/writing about Salt in Wounds, the word 'blood' is a major consideration. Since so much of the town and the surrounding area has been tainted/altered by exposure to Tarrasque viscera (most importantly blood), there is a temptation to name everything the 'blood this' or 'bloody that'—because the river is bloody. And the swamp to the southeast is bloody. And the nearby snows are (becoming) bloody, and the spilling of the Tarrasque's life essence (which has a physical embodiment of its blood) is magically altering everything in and around Salt in Wounds.

But I don't want to use the word 'blood' more than I have to, because repetition is lazy writing that is ultimately less fun (both to read and to create).

How do I get (or at least attempt to get) around the limitations of language while still communicating important information (that this place/person/thing is blood tainted)?

First, I use synonyms. I personally don't often turn to a thesaurus; I've found that over-relying on this otherwise useful tool means that I utilize words incorrectly as I'm unaware of subtle (but incredibly important) shades of meaning. Also, standard writing best practice is not to use a more complex word where a simpler one could suffice. Even so, my background as a horror writer means I have a *lot* of synonyms and complimentary words ready to go.

Viscera is one of my favorites along with ichor, gore, carnage and so on. I like replacing 'blood' or 'bloody' with red, sometimes coaxing it away from being an adjective to a noun. "*...from the massive wounds gouged out of the beast's sides, where its thick hide had been pierced by one of the battering ram-like piercers manned by the God-Butchers; red gushed out.*" Vital fluid is a little bit tame for my tastes. Alternately, 'sanguine' is always interesting to be because it can mean red/bloody but also hopeful. For all its problems, Salt in Wounds is a sanguine place for most its inhabitants.

Second, I play with Latin, Greek, Finnish, and so on. For instance, the Greek word for blood is 'aima.' I like that, and—even though it's from a different language—it reminds me of the latin 'anima', which means (amongst other things) 'vital force', which speaks to the role that blood plays in an organism. I might play with that when I need a place or concept name. Perhaps the tunnels below the city are called the Aimaries (which sounds almost like arteries). Alternately, maybe the central group of merchants is called 'The Aimarie Council', suggesting their role of controlling the true 'life's blood' (trade) of Salt in Wounds[3]. I could go further, inventing a true fantasy language to build off of and twist. But instead I find that, for most fantasy writing, it's enough to have a few base languages to turn to when naming people/places/things. In Salt in Wounds, I'm using/perverting real world Latin and several Scandinavian languages (which clever

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[3]I ended up calling this group the 'Blood Merchants.'

readers have already noticed in the naming traditions of the aristocrats of 5th house).

To counteract those strategies, and to introduce variety in all things, I make sure I regularly go back to basics. And that means NOT opting for a more complicated synonym or invented/perverted word at every possibility; sometimes naming something or other 'Heartsblood Marsh' or 'The God-Butchers' is exactly right. If the merchant committee is the 'Aimarie Council' then another group should have a simple name to counterbalance, like the thieves guild being called 'the Red-Handed' (although that's a little too on the nose for me). If everything is a ten-dollar word, possibly one I invented, then it tires out the reader—or at least, it tires *me* out. <u>Dune</u> is a good example of doing this well; on one page, the author Frank Herbert describes the Bene Gesserit or Sardaukar, but on the next he discusses the Fish Speakers or the Face Dancers.

These are some thoughts I had about naming in Salt in Wounds and fiction in general, and three strategies I use whenever I write, particularly when I need to write about a recurring motif like those of Salt in Wounds: blood, pain, commerce as god, and the problems of today being the solutions to yesterday's problems.

# THE SALT IN WOUNDS WRITING PROCESS

*As of June 2015*

Back in 2015, when I first started drafting Salt in Wounds, this was my writing process.

## 1. Brainstorm in WorkFlowy

First step, I use WorkFlowy for all my brainstorming/project organizing. WorkFlowy is amazing and free; basically, it's infinitely nested and utterly searchable lists available on any device you happen to be using. This is where I quickly jot down notes, brainstorm, and just play with ideas.

## 2. 1st Draft Longhand Notebook

After organizing/vomiting out my thoughts via WorkFlowy, I proceed to write a longhand version in my special Salt in Wounds composition notebook. I enjoy the physical act of writing longhand cursive (even though my penmanship is atrocious), especially with a fountain pen. It's also nice because it's free of distractions, can be done anywhere, and is the best way I've found to get out of my own way and just *write.* If you're curious about fountain pens, the Pilot Varsity Disposable fountain pens are what first got me hooked.

## 3. Transcribe into Google Docs

After finishing a draft in the notebook, I'll type it up into Google Docs so I have access from whatever PC I happen to be using (I use a laptop for my day job, a Chromebook for idle browsing, and share a workhorse desktop PC with my wife). It's amazing how many errors and little tweaks I catch at this stage; writing a longhand first draft and being forced to take this step really helps me polish.

## 4. Additional Draft in Google Docs

I then create an additional draft in Google Docs.

## 5. Copy Nonformatted Version into Blogger, Additional Draft

Sometimes, bizarre formatting artifacts are transferred in from whatever word processor I was using into Blogger (this was a much bigger issue when I was transferring and divvying up the old Tribality Salt in Wounds posts) so now I'm paranoid about weird typographical issues that make things look funky. In order to ensure this doesn't happen, I first copy/paste the text into Notepad before copying and pasting into Blogger. At this point I do another draft specifically for spelling and grammatical errors (avoiding, if at all possible, editing for content).

## 6. Typographical Edits

I recently bought and read (and highly recommend) the freely available web book Practical Typography which is all about the artistry of typeset language. It's been a huge help in changing my approach to publishing and presenting my work as a professional. At this point in the process I specifically produce a draft in Blogger that's

focused on producing the most pleasing typographical presentation of my words I can manage. (By the way, while I recommend reading all of it, just taking a moment to review <u>Practical Typography</u>'s *Typography in Ten Minutes* section will probably greatly improve your ability to present the written word.)

## 7. Promotion

From here, I promote. I actually want to build as large an audience as possible, so getting my work in front of people (and then encouraging those people to comment, share, and otherwise join the conversation) is as much a part of the process as writing in the first place. I auto-tweet each post, share them in relevant Google+, Facebook, and Reddit communities. I'm still figuring out how to do this well, most importantly to avoid slipping past that nigh invisible demarcation of 'cool guy excited to share his work' to 'fucking spammer'… which is more art than science, although I do my best to follow any posted community rules/best practices. I share every week on the /r/loremasters subreddit (since that's where I've gotten the consistently best response) and share on other communities if/when a certain piece will be of particular interest. I should also point out that, by far, the most traffic comes from Reddit, with Facebook a distant second and Google+ a struggling third.

## 8. Update WorkFlowy

This is probably the step I need to take time to improve upon. I need to keep WorkFlowy up to date with any changes I've made (like the spelling of a character's name

say, or swapping out genders). Salt in Wounds is now too big and too detailed for me to hold in my head, so keeping my notes up to date, accurate, and referring to them in order to ensure I get details right is becoming an even bigger part of my process.

# ON GROWING UP IN PUBLIC

*Creating a 'Living' Setting*

I want to talk about what I mean when I refer to Salt in Wounds as a 'living' setting and how pursuing the project plays into my professional development.

The Novelist/Curator/Filmmaker/Anarchic Creative Jim Munroe, a writer I very much admire, talks about how one of the unique aspects of making art in the 21st century is that we're all 'growing up in public.' What he means by that is that we're all honing our craft, experimenting, and developing as creators in a more or less public sphere, where any interested party can view our progress, and that this is different from how it was, say, 20 years ago.

If I were a visual artist thirty years ago, I'd spend a lot of time in school and a lot of time practicing until I'd honed my craft enough to be considered 'commercially viable' by anyone who was hiring visual artists, nobody would see these earlier works except those close to me and my teachers. (Exceptions abound; there's always been self-publishing, and in the 80s there was a thriving zine scene, but it was harder to do *then* rather than now). Nowadays, I'd be posting sketches and art to places like DeviantArt, Facebook, and so on. Assuming I had developed an audience, they'd watch my skills develop, seeing all (or at least more) of the 'practice' pieces in a way that wouldn't necessarily have been the case before.

In my career as a guy who makes things up, I have a long litany of 'practice' pieces scattered about that you can find if you're curious. These range from short stories I 'sold' for the exposure, to my first novel I published via a successful Kickstarter campaign (which ended up losing me money in the short run). There's at least one thing good, or even great about each of these individual pieces of work; but there's also plenty that makes me cringe… although maybe 'practice' piece is the wrong phrase; every piece was the best I could produce given the limitations I had (my skill level, time budget, and so on). Every piece was a thing unto itself, and made me better able to make the next thing.

I've been selling fiction for over a decade, writing longer than that. And I've still only barely begun my development as a writer-publisher. It's also important to note that writing-publishing involves a bunch of related but distinct 'jobs' in which I have varying levels of competence.

As a writer, I can form a cogent sentence and hit a deadline (most of the time). I can occasionally dazzle or inspire. I have neat ideas, although I think good ideas are some of the easiest things to produce (everyone has a few). I'm *good* at writing. However, I want to be better than good: I want to be *great*. Along with the publishing production chain, writing is where I have the most competence. Writing is also where my improvements in the years to come will be the most subtle and require the most effort—because I've already picked most of the low hanging fruit.

As an editor, most especially of myself, I leave a lot to be desired. But even though I'm not always capable of doing the editing work (or finding and paying someone else to), I at least have a better outline of what's needed here. And while I have many workarounds (multiple drafts in different formats, utilizing the generosity of editing-minded friends, hiring freelance editors, or tapping editors from traditional publishers who are putting out my work) I'm still, unfortunately, not consistently outputting competently edited work. If I get better at buckling down, really and truly studying the craft of editing, learn to budget my time better and make the effort to edit (because even with traditional publishing, nobody cares about getting my work right as much as I do) then I can significantly improve in this area. There are some easy gains to be had here, they'll just require some shifts in my mindset.

As a publisher, since I want to treat even freely released entries on Salt in Wounds as professional publishing, I have even further to go. My own lack of skills is most apparent here, not least due to the fact that there's so much that goes under the umbrella of publishing: project management, typography and layout (which is related to editing but isn't editing), marketing, distribution, sales and promotion. This is not to mention the complementary endeavors of shepherding community and conversation around the work, which overlaps with promotion but remains distinct.

I'm competent in project management, something below competent in promotion. But in addition to leveling up my

editing game, a better understanding of the art of typography will result in the largest, easiest gains in cultivating a professional perception of my work. In the past, I was prone to dismissing these aspects as 'not really my job' and less important. At the time, I felt as though content is what *really* matters, thought that people should be able to look past a less-than-mediocre layout and piss-poor editing for the sake of my brilliance. Now, I understand that every part of my work (from creation, to typos, to font) all communicate; all these aspects matter.

I've spent a bunch of hours over the last few days reading Practical Typography (which is great, and I highly recommend it to everyone) and trying to apply its lessons to the Salt in Wounds website. In the weeks to come, I'll reread Strunk and White's Elements of Style, this time not skimming my way through but actively engaging, seeking to do the hard work of sucking at something (editing) in order to improve the work I do.

Crafting Salt in Wounds as a 'live' setting (that is, one that I'll be actively adding to, tweaking, soliciting feedback for, and changing for the next year) gives me a chance to develop all aspects of this craft of writing-publishing publicly with a community of fans that cares. Because so many people have taken the time to offer encouragement and feedback, I get to level up as a writer, as an editor, and as a publisher in a more conscious way (while making money) than I ever have before.

With this project, you're going to watch me develop, try new things, change my mind, and make tweaks and

changes, all in an effort to improve myself and put out the best work I'm capable of. Next September, I'll be a different writer than when I started, and the free, web version of Salt in Wounds will be the best I could make it.

Thanks for wanting to help make this happen. Thanks for being interested in watching me grow up in public.

# DESIGNING FOR PATHFINDER VS 5E

As part of the unlocked 'crunch' threshold of the Patreon campaign, I've been working on designing monster stat blocks and character customizations for 5th Edition rules related to Salt in Wounds. It's something I perhaps should have been doing for a while now; 'crunch' posts tend to get a better response than the pure 'fluff' ones and building an audience is one of my stated goals for my ongoing work on Salt in Wounds.

But it's fascinating transitioning from being (primarily) a designer with the Pathfinder ruleset to 5th Edition. I'm a big fan of Pathfinder, and I will still play, run, and even write material for it, but I do like the elegance of 5th Edition.

One of the biggest differences is that there aren't really any 'small' bonuses in 5th Edition. The 'smallest' character options you can design for 5th Edition as it stands now are feats which, by and large, are much more game-changing than Pathfinder feats; most single 5th Edition feats represent capabilities more likely to be found as several feats or a class ability in Pathfinder. From there, the next 'smallest' options are Backgrounds or a class customization, which can have an incredible influence in how a character operates in the gameworld. Compare this to Pathfinder, where details about a character's pre-adventuring background could be statted as 'traits', which mostly provide a +1 bonus here or there.

In Pathfinder, knowing the system incredibly well allows players to amass a stack of small bonuses that can make their character far and away mechanically superior to characters made by less knowledgeable players. This isn't impossible in 5e, but it doesn't seem to be something that can be done on the same scale.

Of course, part of the fun in Pathfinder is building these intricate constructs from a host of fascinating attributes, which is part of what made my book <u>The Adequate Commoner</u> work: creativity in the mechanics of character design to bring about fascinating tactics and play options. With 5e, there aren't a lot of flat numerical bonuses. You're either proficient in something or you aren't; with competencies & effectiveness (once gained) scaling without further character interaction such as the acquisition of relevant items or the choice to 'spend' the regularly accruing skill points/feats. This is even true with cantrips.

There's still plenty to design (I want to do *at least* Salt in Wounds flavored class customization for each class) but not as much as there is in Pathfinder. For instance, in Pathfinder I might well do a host of traits for characters with a background working with the God-Butchers, Process Guild, et al; the best I could justify a similar design with 5e would be slight reskins for the 'Guild Artisan' background.

As a game designer, the most important thing (no matter what system you design for) is understanding the intent and flow of the rules, designing your work to mesh well,

and most of all organizing your work to give players and GMs the best chance of not having the rules get in the way of their fun.

# MAKE MAPS | LEAVE GAPS

I wholeheartedly subscribe to the RPG design philosophy 'Make Maps, Leave Gaps.' Basically, this sentiment translates to 'have some details, but leave space for inspiration/player interest to create the environment,' which has me wondering what level of granular detail is appropriate (or even desirable) for a world-building project.

On the one hand, I don't want Salt in Wounds (or any world I build) to feel like homework; you shouldn't need to study to get all the names right in order to have any fun. But even if I do pour exhaustive detail into the setting, I don't think most people *play* Role Playing Games that way… they get the gist, kind of remember some details to hang an adventure on, and then just go with it (for instance, a lot of people think Salt in Wounds is built *on* the Tarrasque instead of *around* it which, if that's your deal, feel free to go with it).

Thus far, all the details I've provided have been fun and interesting. But now, having written about the setting for over a year, I need to ensure that, as I continue flesh this thing out, I keep my posts focused on providing the most interesting, relevant, engaging, and above all gameable information (and avoid producing a lot of word stacks that won't add to anyone's enjoyment).

Here's some advice I'm thinking about concerning balancing details:

*1. Use 1-Page 'Cheat Sheets'*

A single typewritten page is probably a good estimate of how much information can be held in the head at any given time. Note, there should probably be *different* ones for both Game Masters and Player Characters, as what is commonly believed about the world and what is actually true can (or even *should*) be massively contradictory.

*2. Maps with Variable Levels of Detail*

Maybe the city (and the area surrounding it) are richly detailed; you can see exactly how many hours' march it is from the gates to the ruined siege tower, said to be claimed by a militant, monastic order of kobolds. Alternately, the forest several days south is simply a huge 'blob' of trees; lots of things (macguffins, dungeons, a sleeping umbral dragon, emergent factions, and even plot points) could be hiding there and/or could be easily inserted according to the needs of the game.

*3. Have an Encyclopedic Resource Available for Those Who Need/Enjoy It*

Some GMs and players are relatively comfortable with improvising, filling in details on the fly (especially assuming they have a solid foundation of basic knowledge/the basic premise to build from). However, some want to know dates and names and specifics, so, if you have the time, build an extensive back catalog of detail. Don't be beholden to it (and certainly don't let it get in the way of the game's fun) but it can be a great resource. More to the point, even if this is rarely used as direct reference to answer questions, this can be a huge

source of inspiration, allowing enterprising GMs and players to find things that inspire them (and these details can easily be cribbed for use in other settings or otherwise used to inspire play in ways you didn't conceive of).

*4. Make Literal Maps*

Which is something I've been lagging on. But things like maps, illustrations, timelines, any way to present information that isn't just text on a page helps anchor attention to important details. I lagged on this, knowing that once I commissioned a map I'd have to ensure that all the details were right and all the names of the important locations were settled.

But that's just my thoughts. Every GM has to balance creating detail and leaving space for inspiration/at-the-table improvisation. And every player has a 'sweet spot' as to a level of setting detail that excites and interests them vs what makes them roll their eyes (instead of the dice).

# UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE

*Buried Threats and Game Design*

During World War 2, an estimated 16 million tons of explosives were dropped, a small fraction of which landed, failed to explode and—even to this day—must be disarmed by trained experts, because we still occasionally discover these (still active) weapons… dangerously hidden below the surface. This concept, that the 'left-over' war devices from seventy or eighty years ago are still being uncovered fascinates me, and 'unexploded ordnance' is something I implement often in my game design.

In our real lives, we live atop ruins and graves, battlegrounds and buildings lost to fires, and so much more. In the ten thousand or so years of recorded human history, cities and empires and even entire languages have blossomed and died and been replaced by what came next. We dig into the past, try to discern who our antecedents were and how they lived. But imagine how different archaeology and history would be if digging into Roman or Maya ruins had the same potential for explosive danger as the aforementioned 'unexploded ordnance.' What if the artifacts, monsters, and places of power from the earliest days of human civilization were potent both then and now? This is how adventuring is commonly depicted, and dealing with fantasy 'unexploded ordnance' can be taken much further, as most fantasy setting have histories that verge into the millions of years and encompass a dizzying array of races and peoples.

When I'm designing a fantasy game world, I like to think about the peoples and epochs that came before the present and how what was left behind can challenge, excite, and threaten characters. This extends far beyond bombs though; artifacts and perils include not only weapons but also portals, partially complete (or only recently completed) magical research/processes, sealed monsters and evils—even works of 'art' or the 'toys' of a powerful enough race.

Personally, I like to take it even further and design how common player character behavior exacerbates the danger of these hidden 'land mines.' For instance, say a party cleared out the cult from that ruined temple of a mad god… did they then disassemble the temple? How did they ensure that the dark runes carved into the stones didn't draw in and seduce another traveler? Perhaps this traveler started a new cult while the PCs were otherwise engaged and—with the heroes half a world away sorting their next adventure—was able to succeed and complete the fell rites where the first cult had failed. It's not enough that the PCs deal with whoever is trying to 'activate' the ordnance, it must also be carefully disarmed.

In the city of Salt in Wounds the biggest 'unexploded ordnance' is the bound Tarrasque butchered perpetually to feed thousands of people, provide reagents for the city's legendary alchemists, and serve as raw materials for artisans like the bone-smiths. For the people of the city, this isn't exceptional (much as I—as a resident of California—don't give a second thought to living so close to the meeting place of two tectonic plates, or on the same

continent as the super-volcano beneath Yellowstone) but for the players (and probably the player characters) this is a looming threat waiting to go off. Then there are the other 'unexploded' perils: the growing, sentient fungal marsh bloating off the Tarrasque's runoff and the ruins left behind by hyper-intelligent dwarven progenitors below the city—not to mention the myriad political and class tensions that threaten to rip Salt in Wounds apart. But in all these things, as a designer I ask myself what sorts of things were left behind by the victories and defeats and excesses of the past... and how can all this leftover ordnance (delightfully) blow up in my players' faces?

# ON MODULARITY

One of the design 'grails' I have for Salt in Wounds is for it to be modular. What I mean by that is that I have my vision for the city and I want to do the best job I can creating it. I want the factions, monsters, characters, and even player options to hang together so that all have a particular flavor of a particular place. I even have a larger world that Salt in Wounds—both thematically and strategically—fits perfectly into: Synoma. When I finally deliver the campaign setting in a finalized series of books, I want it all to hang together in a form that's sensible, compelling, gameable and above all FUN.

Even as I do this, I also want Salt in Wounds to be modular and I want it to be modular on multiple levels.

I want to support gamers slapping it into whatever game world they favor (whether designed at home or officially published) so the city itself can be placed modularly into a range of continents. I also want the city to be internally modular; don't like how the Process Guild functions or think it adds an unnecessary complication to the flow of goods? Take it out and replace it with something else (or nothing at all).

Finally, I want Salt in Wounds as a whole to be captivating, but I also want its individual components to be captivating. This is especially important as I promote individual posts and try to expand my audience. The monsters, locations, and other parts of the setting can and

should be readily extractable for use in a different setting (like how I pulled some of my favorite bits from the intro to Paizo's <u>Curse of the Crimson Throne</u> for the Salt in Wounds virtual tabletop game).

To give this sensibility the shape of a metaphor: when designing Salt in Wounds, I want to produce the best 'album' of which I'm capable, but divided into compelling 'tracks' and further subdivided into individual beats and components for remixing. Gaming as a hobby is one that has always been available for remixing: the only rule is to have fun. I'm delighted, in my own small way, to continue that tradition.

# THE MINI-GAMES OF RPGS

Designing Salt in Wounds' character customizations has me thinking a lot about tabletop game design: specifically, how the world's oldest RPG has multiple mini-games included in the 'meta' game, and how hard it is to design and balance for them all.

First and foremost is the 'game' of combat; the overcoming of dangerous opponents through force of arms or force of magic. This is the most common 'game' (at least at the tables I play at) and this is a game in which all player classes can function in ways that are fairly easy to understand. (As a corollary, understanding how a character class operates in this game, such as what their combat abilities are, is the part of the character class description that receives the most attention/detail.) The other mini-games are a little harder to balance and have historically been the domain for one of the characters to shine (often at the expense of others).

First, there is the social mini-game, where (commonly) rather than stabbing someone you attempt to get them to come around to your way of thinking by careful application of words. This is interesting because, while there are certainly rules for these encounters, in my experience they function much more like a live-action improvisation between the GM and the players. This is interesting because the players who have a higher 'real life' charisma usually do better here, in a far more

pronounced way than the relative combat advantages afforded to someone more tactically skilled.

In addition to the social 'mini-game' there exists a variety of 'skill' mini-games of which stealth, exploration, and tracking are the most common. In these games, you usually have a single PC (such as a rogue for stealth or a ranger for tracking an enemy) who makes a series of rolls to complete a challenge. However, even moreso than the 'social' mini-game, this can devolve into the 'rogue show' where most of the PCs have nothing to do while the stealthy character makes a series of decisions. Even as someone who is a fan of sneaky, tactically surprising play on the part of the PCs, I've considered houserules banning rogues and/or the stealth skill in general just to ensure there aren't large chunks of gameplay where most players lack agency and are instead forced to wait for some other PC to resolve their 'area of expertise.'

The other mini-game is of course puzzles and discovery: challenges or encounters that don't have stats involved but instead rely on creative problem solving (riddles, or logic puzzles like pushing a series of switches that change the colors of a dragon statue's scales).

Balancing characters so that they all have a role in all minigames (instead of just a specialized combat role) is something I'll explore more fully in [Baseline Better Burst Better Situationally Better](#).

# BASELINE BETTER | BURST BETTER | SITUATIONALLY BETTER

Recently, I've been considering burst vs situational vs baseline abilities. Specifically, while I was analyzing the 5th Edition fighter vs the 5th Edition barbarian I noticed that (at a relatively low level) the raging barbarian can gain resistance (if not outright immunity to nonmagical) slashing/piercing/bludgeoning damage. This means that, in a toe to toe battle, a fighter lacking a magic weapon literally couldn't hurt the barbarian. Rage, however, is a finite resource, so a fighter that intelligently avoided the barbarian for a minute (or a fighter that came across a barbarian who had previously expended her rage in other battles) would have an advantage. This is one of the great design conceits of traditional fighters: while other classes might outperform on the battlefield situationally (rogue sneak attack) or as a burst (barbarian rage), the fighter (and more specifically, the champion fighter in 5e) will be just as effective, with the same  options and abilities to threaten, after twenty fights as he was during the first one (assuming he can recover his HP, which is his only limited resource). A lot of developers have stated that straining party resources is good game design; if parties can count on having plenty of prep time for a single encounter each day, then there is no real time for the 'baseline better' characters to shine.

I like the concept of one character being baseline superior at something with the other characters being situationally better or better temporarily due to expenditure of scarce resources aka 'burst better.' 5e provides 'burst better' most obviously in the form of spells: a properly buffed spellcaster might well be able to outfight a fighter, out-sneak a rogue, or out-talk a silver-tongued bard. To do this, though, would most probably mean removing their other options for later, which makes a compelling character choice.

To illustrate, imagine an extremely simple game design where every character can do 1 point of damage per attack. The special ability of fighters is to do an additional +1 damage on every attack. Clerics can call upon divine power to gain +4 to a single attack once a day. Rogues gain +4 damage to an attack when the fast moving sun goes into eclipse. If a character expects to need to make 4 attacks a day, the fighter and the cleric are 'balanced.' If a character can expect to make 4 attacks a day (and there's a 25% chance that an eclipse will be happening during any given attack) then the fighter, the cleric, and the rogue are all balanced. Of course, this doesn't take into account the relative utility of being able to *choose* when the bonus occurs for the cleric, or the potential excitement of randomization for the rogue. Enemy statistics also change the balance; if a character will only ever face enemies that require 2 damage to defeat then that tilts things in favor of the fighter, while higher hp enemies *might* tilt things in favor of the cleric. You can further modify this by giving constrains to the burst power (the

cleric must forgo an attack to pray in anticipation of his blessing).

But what, for me, is *most* interesting mechanically is considering at the games outside combat and rearranging who is baseline-situationally-burst better. For instance, say characters have a minimum of one persuasion point when talking to NPCs, but rogues get an additional +1 on every conversation, fighters can intimidate to gain a +4 on one conversation a day (doing more gets them arrested) while clerics gain +4 when dealing with someone of their same religion (for which there's a 25% chance). Or, you can delink special abilities from character builds entirely; for instance within the cypher system, by way of the eponymous 'cyphers', individual characters will often have situational boosts or the ability to solve problems that aren't likely to be repeated (and have nothing to do with their character choice).

Traditionally, 'situationally' better advantages in combat have been covered by sneak attack + favored enemies which can make rogues and rangers 'better' at melee combat. The options for becoming situationally better at social and skill challenges are more limited but well worth considering. 5e does a good job of suggesting social 'situational' advantages; namely that a character often has an immediate 'in' with a certain segment of the population, based upon the character's background: for example, a folk hero cleric might receive a more welcome response from the peasants than the normally supernaturally charming warlock.

However, a lot more can be done in finding 'situationally better' moments regarding the other skill challenges. For instance, despite his relatively low stealth score, a disguised fighter might be better at infiltrating the enemy army's camp because his stature and bearing are more appropriate to those of a soldier. Maybe, despite a ranger's natural aptitude for tracking, it's actually the party wizard who will be better able to identifying the odd footprints of the xen-beast because he studied one at the college (or maybe his ability to see the aetherial realm makes tracking magical beasts easier). The Fate RPG system does a good job of this sort of thing through invocation of aspects and other systems have similar mechanisms, but I would love to see more work like this done in more crunch-heavy systems.

As always, all of this can be done via 'rulings' (ie, the hulking but low charisma half-orc fighter is better at intimidating people than the foppish, halfling bard regardless of the rules) but as a game designer I design with the assumption that the rules should be set up in such a way that the GMs have as little need to go against them as possible, and once I settled on the framework 'Baseline Better – Situationally Better – Burst Better' it made everything make a little more sense. This framework is one that I'll be relying upon more heavily in game design moving forward.

# ON PHONING IT IN

*The Practice of Writing Through Inspiration Highs and Lows*

By my standards, for the past month, I've been writing/working without inspiration and found myself barely able to meet my minimums. As far as Salt in Wounds goes: a couple posts snuck in just barely before the weekly deadline I keep for myself, I have a long list of to-dos I *thought* I'd be done with last month, I'm behind on Patreon rewards, and so on. That wonderful feeling of the 'winds in my sails' hasn't been with me.

I didn't talk about this fear and hence denied myself the opportunity to make all of this an *overt* problem that could be dealt with and instead left it gnawing at the back of my mind where the worry became a significant cognitive tax. My work, creative and otherwise, suffered, compounded by the fact that I had scheduled out August as a sprint to prep for the Salt in Wounds Kickstarter. I failed to achieve so many of the benchmarks I had set for myself and wasted time getting into cycles of self-recrimination about these missed marks that only *further* diminished my output.

Even so, I still worked. I still wrote. I still prepped for the Kickstarter. I still promoted my work. Perhaps not my best work, but enough. And that's only because I set up the habit of writing Salt in Wounds.

Inspiration is a fickle thing, and while it's something to be enjoyed when I have it, it inevitably flees... usually when I need it most. Sometimes it leaves because I doubt myself, sometimes it leaves because I'm not taking care of myself in some critical way, sometimes it leaves because life intrudes and *sometimes* it leaves for no discernible reason at all—but it is my experience that it always departs. Part of the reason that a regular practice is so important is that it keeps me making progress in spite of myself; I don't need to 'feel' like creating because I don't work based on how I feel, I work based on habit, on practice, on mental 'muscle memory.'

I'm feeling better now, that ineffable _ is back and the work flows so much better, more joyfully. That will fade, someday, again; but when it does I'll be able to rely on the thickening lines of habit I lay down each time I practice to guide me through.

# ON 'SUCCESS'

By my standards, the (still only 50% complete) Salt in Wounds Kickstarter has been an overwhelming success; in 48 hours I'd raised more money than in my previous 16 years of writing and now, approaching two weeks in, it's looking like I might end up raising more than my annual salary (Post-Kickstarter update: I did).

Put another way, I've always liked (and been steering my creative career towards) the 'thousand true fans' concept: basically, having an ongoing relationship with ~1000 people willing to give me a day's wage for my creative work (~$100) every year is a much better and more sustainable model than trying to get 100,000 people to give me a dollar. As I type these words, 468 people have given me an average of $58.34 apiece. (Post-Kickstarter edit: it ended up being just over a thousand at around $57 apiece). Are these 'true fans'? Not yet; many (if not most) are probably more into the concept than me as a creator. However, depending on how well I deliver, this could be a tremendous base on which to build the option of a full-time creative career.

And I do say option because—perhaps for the first time in my life—I'm not sure I would take the leap to being a full-time creative (even with ample savings, even with a track record of similarly successful projects which I don't have… yet). I like my job. I like sick days and vacations and 401k matching funds. I'm not sure I'm willing to give that up, even with how much I like creating and getting

paid to create. For now, both works; and it's looking like my (potential) problems of the future will be due to abundance and freedom of choice rather than a lack of options.

I have jitters, worries that I won't be able to deliver (I will). I feel some remnant fear that when the backers see what I deliver they'll feel cheated (they won't, I've been transparent and public about who I am and what I create—linking to an incredible backlog of quality game writing—and my backers are going to *continue* to love my work). I struggle to remind myself that I can't work all the time… even during this storm of money and attention. I need space to relax and enjoy and do all the important work of being a father and husband and friend: the kind of human I want to be.

I have a tendency, in this highly charged moment, to search obsessively for my doom, why this isn't going to work and why it will all be taken from me… the urge to pathologize seeking any purchase. Recently, when I had an argument with someone I loved, I wondered if this was all too stressful for me to handle rather than (immediately) acknowledging that, while the squabble wasn't ideal, it was well within the ordinary range of my problems and issues and not evidence of a deep imbalance related to the 'pride (or even just happiness) comes before a fall' narrative that is buried deep within me.

Even with all those silly stress responses, this moment, for me, is a delight and a challenge and a promise and a problem that I'm relishing the opportunity to solve. I am

so grateful to have been given this gift of attention and pledges to pay me for my creative work, just as I was so grateful to fund the publication of my first novel for a thousand dollars, or have writing gigs that grew from $.005 to .$.025 to $.25 a word payments.

While there is a 'career planning' part of my brain that is already running facts & figures and thinking about what comes next, while there is *also* that wilting part of me that wants to focus on past failures, my past scale, to bleed anxiety into this moment, the biggest part of me is simply thankful to be here, now. With that gratitude shaping what I do, I want to honor this time, my current talents, and these gifts by doing the best possible job. None of this defines me; all of it is merely where I am *now* (which will be so different in a year, in ten years, in forty years), but for now, I'm thankful and happy and inspired and ready to get to work.

# DESIGNING FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF 'FUN'

Game designer Marc "MAHK" LeBlanc is credited with defining eight essential types of 'fun' within a game, ranging from sensation to discovery to submission (you should google 'eight kinds of fun' when you have a moment—it's fascinating). This seems common knowledge, but different gamers come to a tabletop RPG looking for different things: some people want power fantasies, some people enjoy putting together interesting combinations of class, racial, and other mechanics to create impressive effects, some people are there to roleplay, spend time with friends, or to explore an alien world: all of the interest types are valid.

One of the difficulties of being a designer (and an aspect that strongly separates the professionals from the hobbyists) is that you yourself have your preferred 'types' of fun, but you (ideally) consider these other fun styles when you're designing for games. This is less true for the more limited modern story RPGs which often focus on doing 'one thing well' and tend to be more consciously designed to maximize only one or a few types of fun. However, the legacy of the world's oldest RPG is that good designers move forward under the assumption that grognards, simulationists, model makers, and more will all gather around the same table (or at least the same rulebook) and so designers bake this knowledge into their

design, making conscious design decisions about how they intend to satisfy these varied tastes.

You can't please everyone. But good designers at least are cognizant of the ways in which they aren't pleasing this or that group, this or that playstyle, and try to make allowances for the types of fun that they themselves do not enjoy. When they make a mechanical decision that makes it easier for a power gamer to feel the thrill of their fantasy, they understand and can articulate the tradeoffs they have made concerning the other fun styles.

Designing not only for yourself but also for others who may come to game for different reasons is difficult, but the ways this tension is navigated and resolved is part of what makes great art arresting.

# KICKSTARTER AFTER ACTION REPORT

After a Kickstarter, I like to discuss what went well, what could have gone better, and what I learned. First, however, a caveat: I firmly believe in the cliché that (oftentimes) success is a *terrible* teacher. Certain things just 'work', and it's always tempting to over-attribute that success to one's own efforts when it very often has to do with capricious forces outside of one's control. As such, take everything I write with a grain of salt (heh)—this is what *I* think worked and didn't.

### Defining 'Massive Success' for J.M. Perkins

The Salt in Wounds Kickstarter was a massive success by my standards. In 48 hours, I'd raised more money than in my previous 16 years of writing. By the time the campaign was done, I'd raised more (in terms of 'gross') than my annual salary. I was comfortable doing the project for $5000 and my personal 'great job' benchmark was $20,000. The fact that we more than doubled that is incredible, daunting, and something for which I am so, so grateful.

### Stat Breakdown

$20,192 (or 34%) was pledged via Kickstarter.

$37,515 was pledged via external sources.

According to Kickstarter, the top ten referral sources for money (representing just shy of 80% of the funds raised) were:

- Direct (19.93%) (Basically think 'catchall' that wasn't sorted into a different category)

- Reddit (15.75%)

- Tabletop Games - Discover (8.74%)

- Google (6.58%)

- Erfworld (5.83%)

- Search (5.07%)

- 48 Hour Reminder email (4.83)

- Facebook (4.56%)

- Advanced Discover (4.29%)

- Profile Starred (4.28%)

As far as where raw traffic was coming from, Google Analytics monitored 27346 sessions and the top five sources (which represents about 86% of the traffic directed to the site) were:

- Direct (11953 sessions)

- Reddit + Reddit mobile (4793 sessions)

- Facebook + Facebook mobile (3326 sessions)

- Google (1942 Sessions)

- Erfworld (1724 Sessions)

## What I Did Well/What Went Well

*Massive pre-Kickstarter campaign* I think the thing that differentiates the Salt in Wounds Kickstarter from most gaming Kickstarters is that I've been publishing this material, for free, and promoting it for almost two years. In that time, I developed a readership in the tens of thousands. I did interviews, actual plays, and more. I had a lot of people who were interested in the project and ready to back, share, and promote it when the project launched. I even went so far as to turn down paying work in order to keep up with Salt in Wounds. My basic philosophy is that people need to see something 3 times before they're willing to act on it (in this case, pledging for the Salt in Wounds Kickstarter) and I did the best job possible to ensure that people had already 'seen' Salt in Wounds twice before they saw the Kickstarter.

This was especially important since (as a game designer) I have less name recognition than a lot of the awesome creators putting out stuff on KS.

*Elevator Pitch* Second, one of the things that made Salt in Wounds work (while other RPG setting and books didn't fund/didn't fund as well) is that Salt in Wounds has a core 'elevator pitch' that implies the unique gameplay that can be achieved with it. Story games and standalone RPGs are good at this; people making expansionary material for 5e and Pathfinder seem to be less consistently focused on doing this well. Making a pitch of 'this setting is just like what you're familiar with—but better!' is a hard sell; instead, tell me (in a sentence or two) what makes your

work unique (which I touched upon in the [Fantasy Flavor](#) essay).

*(Sub)Reddit Fueled* Third, I'm extremely grateful Salt in Wounds was a hit with the Reddit RPG communities. They've been the primary vehicle for promoting my work and were the biggest single source of traffic and pledges. Other than that, I *did* promote well on Twitter, Facebook, as well as more traditional media like guest blogging, podcasts and more—but I bet large on Reddit and it worked. It's my belief that, though they aren't perfect, the big Reddit communities offer a creator their *best* chance to get quality work seen by the biggest numbers of people (as their algorithms seem to be the most 'fair' while not being as temporally spastic as Twitter). I'm not sure how much this could be reproduced as every creator (and even every project) needs to determine which communities are going to be the best to generate interest in their work.

*Erfworld for the Win!* Erfworld is a fantastic webcomic with a tremendous community (you should totally read it if you aren't already). Rob (the author) generously granting me access for Kickstarter promotion (it's part of his 'kicking it forward ethic) has been *huge* for both the Adequate Commoner (my last KS) and this one.

*Eye Catching Design* The Salt in Wounds Kickstarter campaign is not the most art-heavy campaign I've seen, but I did a good job, as art project manager and designer, creating and setting up design elements that caught backers' eyes, and communicated the caliber of professionalism that will be put into the project. I've

worked hard in the last year to develop some basic design skills and design sensibility, and this paid off.

*Cool Rewards, Good Stretch Goals, and Good Pledge Level Design* I pretty much accomplished my goals for backer level designs; with people backing an average of over $50, I gave people a compelling reason to give me a bunch of money.

## Things I Could Improve On

*Mastering Advertising* I didn't advertise Salt in Wounds at all, and while I don't think a Kickstarter campaign built primarily on advertising is a good idea, getting it right can definitely add more than it takes away. With so many tools out there, there *are* good options; as with most things, it's about finding the options that add value rather than annoy/detract. After this project, hopefully I have some capital to try some varying advertising strategies.

*Improving the Video* The project video was… not great (especially compared to the last video I did for <u>Adequate Commoner</u>). Scheduling more time to produce the video (and securing professional grade equipment and assistance) will be important for any future projects.

*Learning More About Analytics* Improving my understanding of analytics and tracking will help propel me into the 'big leagues' of publishers.

*Preparing More Ready-to-Go Material* There's a lot of work that I ended up having to do during the campaign (everything from writing responses to questions to updating the stretch goal images) that I *could* have

prepared before the campaign started. This was especially true of the work I dismissed as 'not taking too much time.' The truth is, my time is *never* scarcer than when I'm running a Kickstarter campaign, so every tactic I have that exports work to 'before' should be explored.

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And that's pretty much it. There's part of me that thinks I could have *maybe* set some additional stretch goals to push for, but ultimately I aligned the goals in a way that was both reasonable for me to produce and exciting for my backers. For my life right now, to 'scale up' from here would mean to do less writing and instead focus on managing a team and publishing, and while I'm happy to 'play those games' I still want Salt in Wounds to be *mine*—I want my fingerprints to be all over this, and my words, sensibilities, and aesthetics to comprise the lion's (or in this case, the Tarrasque's) share of the work.

Basically, I've succeeded in my role as writer, and (with this project at least) my role as fundraiser. Now, I get to practice the role of publisher (with all the subdivisions, complications, and rewards that entails).

# HOW I'M PRODUCING SALT IN WOUNDS

*2016 Post-Kickstarter Update*

I recently stumbled upon the concept of 'technical debt.' This idea (cribbed from software development) refers to all the shortcuts, hot fixes, inefficiencies, and lingering unresolved (or half-resolved) problems that get worked around in order to meet a deadline. These issues represent a 'debt' that has to be repaid with 'interest.' It ultimately 'costs' more to fix a problem than it would have cost to do it right in the first place… but as the deadline was onrushing the time scarcity was hitting harder earlier rather than later.

All creative projects have some form of this problem; for most creators, their work is not so much ever finished as eventually 'turned in.'

Now, with my Kickstarter having smashed through every stretch goal (and with Salt in Wounds growing accordingly) I've been thinking about my process, about the technical debt I've accrued, and how I can avoid generating more. I've been reexamining how things are done with an eye to producing books with the knowledge that, in order to publish them in the timeframe I want, I will have to collaborate with more people on a deeper level than I've ever done before, and so I need a greater understanding of my process, a better ability to 'show the blueprints' and assign tasks months ahead in a such a

way that they'll all (mostly) fit together when I begin piecing everything together into the final books.

Here's my updated process:

*1. Generate Detailed Outlines with To-Dos for Each Book*

In the past, I tended not to outline or only outline in broad strokes (the border between outlines and brainstorming being blurry). Now, as I write, edit, and manage a diverse, global team of designers, artists, editors and more, it is *mandatory* that I have a clear, easily communicated vision of what the 'final' product(s) will be, what specifically needs to be done to make that happen, and when tasks need to be completed by. This is especially important because, in many cases, both the art and descriptive text and other elements will be produced concurrently by two separate parties, and both will have to match each other.

*2. Create a Style Guide*

A style guide is simply a clear explanation of what I need/expect from my collaborators. In my case, this deals primarily with how writers and designers should format the text they turn in (flat text, no formatting, with 'tags' like [heading] [special] and so on where they think appropriate); for layout artists and others, it's font types and colors and so on.

*3. Wrangle Freelancers into a Group Communication Channel*

For my previous projects, I ended up using a mix of email, text, and phone calls/in person meetings. Now, I'm

switching to Ryver for a single repository of all communication/coordination. I feel *a little* bad about asking people to setup a new account/communication channel, but frankly, I need this level of coordination to keep myself sane (and any artist who doesn't want to do so is free not to work on the project).

*4. Divvy Up Assignments, Including to Myself*

*5. Work My Assignments*

I'm not just product lead, I'm also a writer and so have assignments just like any freelancer. For me, my process is to first draft longhand and then do a typed draft.

*6: Back and Forth with the Freelancers*

Every freelancer will have questions, and there will be at least one back and forth before a draft of theirs is 'accepted.'

*7. Combine all Texts/Assignments into a Single Document*

*8. Collect Art*

This is one of the steps I'm *most* looking forward to; I can't wait to see Salt in Wounds spring to life visually due to the efforts of talented artists.

*9. Edit*

At minimum, there's going to be at least 2 layers of editing (substantive and copy). I'll have to do some of this work, but mostly I'm going to rely on hiring outside editors to get to the level of quality I want.

*10. Layout*

It's time to make the words pretty, and the art pop!

## 11. Hardcopy Proof

This is the very last chance to catch errors.

## 12. Print/Digitally Publish

Hurray, the job is done! Now, back to whatever step I'm on with the *other* supplements.

## 13. Schedule Time for Housekeeping

This is a 'meta' step, that doesn't have a particular order, but I need to regularly put aside time (probably weekly) just to keep all the files straight, in the right place, and do all the digital administration work to keep things straight.

Obviously, the process is a little more complicated now than it was when I started. And the notion of 'steps' is a little misleading; while there is definitely an order to how things work, so much will be happening concurrently. My work also includes time to research and a thousand little substeps and business steps (researching my printer, accounting, communicating with backers). The wonderful thing, however, is that I now have the funds necessary to pay some talented people to do a lot of this work for me, but in order to be able to avail myself of that, I have to understand all the necessary steps, break down the process, and reassign as needed.

# EPILOGUE

I hope this collection of essays managed to inform, delight, and help you better understand not only me but writers generally. As I mentioned in the introduction, I would *love* to generate some meaningful bookends to round out this collection, but the truth of the matter is that for now I'm more interested in performing the work instead of commenting on it. Basically, you should use your impressive gamer imagination to make up a compelling final word about these essays… (you could even send it my way by emailing me john@jmperkins.com).

And so, I end this collection by making an author saving throw against more work. I rolled a 17… so I think I'm ok.

# BIO

J.M. Perkins is an action horror author, game designer, and writer of other things. By day he is an Administrator for a biotech company, by night he's asleep… mostly.

He's sold over twenty short stories and used three successful kickstarter campaigns to publish his work. Currently, J.M. Perkins is creating his Tabletop RPG Setting 'The City of Salt in Wounds.' You can learn more about J.M. Perkins at his website www.jmperkins.com

# WANT MORE SALT IN WOUNDS?

*The City of Salt in Wounds*

Upon approach to the city, the first thing a traveler will note is the sounds of the monster screaming. Its roar echoes for dozens of leagues, and the ground occasionally trembles as the creature at the core of Salt in Wounds thrashes. Most times, the God-Butchers and Marrow Miners keep the creature unconscious but even they—toiling night and day—can not extract enough to keep the creature down every hour. Drawing closer, the traveler will notice the shift in ecology and weather; the deciduous forest with its seasonal snows gives way to a humid, almost tropical…

*Salt in Wounds is a living campaign setting, currently being developed by J.M. Perkins.*

*Learn more at www.saltinwoundssetting.com*