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Made for Dungeons & Cabins

Worldbuilding Off the Rails: Fantasy, TTRPGs, And Improvised Comedy:

By Brady Hutchings

Improv Comedy – D&D – Fantasy

Terry Pratchett once claimed that the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* relates to fantasy as Mt. Fuji does to Japanese prints: “Sometimes it’s big and up close. Sometimes it’s a shape on the horizon. Sometimes it’s not there at all, which means that the artist either has made a deliberate decision against the mountain, which is interesting in itself, or is in fact standing on Mt. Fuji.” One cannot imagine where fantasy would be today without the roots established by Tolkien. Building on this metaphor, I would argue that improv is to fantasy as cherry blossoms are to Japanese prints: clearly a big part of it. (I’m not as elegant as Pratchett.)

Carl Sagan once said, “If you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.” When two improv performers walk out on stage, they create a universe together. Usually they’ll get suggestions from the audience, and then they might start scenes with a simple *hello*. Or they might launch off as an insane character. Whatever happens, the improvisers agree on the accepted reality and try to add more details to the universe. Someone slips into a pirate voice? Now they’re on a ship. One pirate says they just don’t love the other as much as they used to? Great, it’s about divorcing pirates. Improv scenes like these can quickly become unhinged. However, the humor that comes from improv scenes isn’t in the crazy scenarios, it’s in the truthful human reactions. I want the pirate to look at their long-term partner/shipmate and give a tearful, “...Yar?” This holds true for worldbuilding in fantasy. I can easily invest in a story, suspending my disbelief about magic, dragons, or whatever else, if the characters themselves feel like real people and react to the world truthfully.

The famous motto of the improv school Upright Citizens Brigade is: “If this is true, what else is true?” For example, the next scene in our show could feature pirate couples therapy or how the *Black Pearl*’s HR department deals with the fallout of pirate divorce (I’m so sorry for sticking with divorced pirates). It offers a way to explore one of the infinite possibilities of this universe. This question arises every time we read a fantasy novel to better understand what a world would be like where we could ride dragons or speak to talking animals.

All this illustrates how fantasy is a big part of improv, but improv has also heavily impacted modern fantasy. I've got three words for you: *Dungeons & Dragons*. While I had always been a fan of fantasy literature, I didn't try *D&D* until my first improv group introduced me to it—and let me tell you, the skills are transferrable. A player reacts organically to whatever their Game Master throws at them and acts out dialogue on the fly, as any improviser might do. *D&D* has exploded in popularity through mainstream TV and videogames such as *Stranger Things* and *Baldur's Gate 3*. This has led to a new medium for fantasy stories: actual play. Series such as *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* use voice actors and comedic improvisers to tell narrative campaigns with high production values, and they have been incredibly successful at it, even selling out Madison Square Garden just last year.

Now I'm pretty bad at math, but if $A=B=C$, then I would like to complete the connection and plainly state that improv plays a large role in fantasy through *D&D*. This is clear to see through the "Chicken or the Egg" dilemma we face with recurring quests, characters, and tropes that get distilled back and forth between fantasy novels and tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs).

What I love about improv, *D&D*, and fantasy novels is that they celebrate worlds that thrive on the smaller details. They have such great overlap that they help each other grow. So here's some writing advice: When your next big fantasy epic starts to feel too bogged down in maps of names you can't pronounce, try a little less planning and a bit more spontaneity. Take a lesson from improv and ask yourself: *What else may be true?* If your novel has dragon riders, then let's see how the town's air traffic control deals with no-fly zones. If your world has talking animals, make sure your characters give informed opinions on the suffrage movement for city rats. The hero's journey not working out for you? What would a truthful life look like for someone else living in this world? Try your hand at improv comedy, which can teach you to think on your feet and get out of your comfort zone.

About Brady Hutchings

Brady Hutchings (he/him) found the meaning to life in a fortune cookie: live, laugh, love. He graduated with an MLitt in Fantasy Literature at the University of Glasgow in 2023. As a member of a house team for the Glasgow Improv Theatre (GIT), he frequently teaches and performs improvised comedy. Brady plays tabletop board games, writes fantasy stories that make you laugh and/or cry, and believes it's always five o'clock somewhere.