

Writing Fiction Through Play-by-Email

Jim Vassilakos

For the past few years, I've been running "The Plankwell Campaign" with Timothy Collinson, who has been co-GMing and co-editing, and in the process, we've been producing a campaign report that sort of reads like a novel. You can find the latest version here:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

(this will be updated periodically)

"A novel?" you say. "That sounds like a lot of work."

Yes, but it's fun work, and there are other advantages as well.

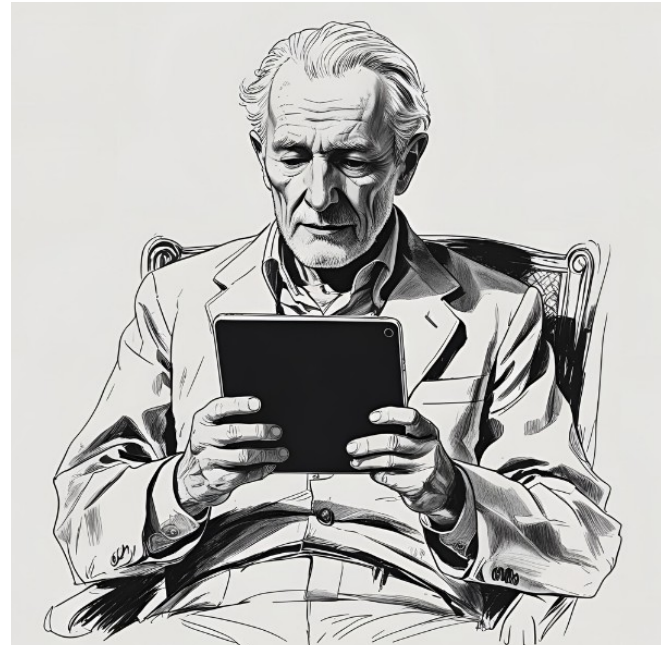
For example, you get into a lot more detail when you write than when you're just sitting around a table engaging in prototypical face-to-face roleplaying. Is that good or bad? Well, I guess it depends on how much detail you want to explore.

I'm going to be honest with you here. I thought I understood the Traveller universe to a fair degree — I'd been playing since the *little black books* came out in the late 70s — but as we started writing this thing out, I soon realized I knew a lot less than I thought. So if you want to learn a campaign setting, especially one that has the depth of the official Traveller universe or even one you've created yourself, writing a story in that setting is a good way to figure out how much you've actually figured out.

Another advantage of writing up a PBEM (Play-by-Email) and massaging it into something resembling a novel as you go is that the document then becomes a sort of campaign bible that you can refer to, reminding yourself of any key details that have become a bit hazy over time. And, of course, there's the most obvious payoff, which is that you can share what you've written with other gamers who are, at least, presumably interested in the setting.

There's also a final payoff, which is less obvious, at least initially, but which may come to be of greater value to you as years pass and the memories of your face-to-face role-playing

campaigns become increasingly obscured. If you do this — turn your gaming into written fiction — you will have essentially crystalized your role-playing memories into a form that you'll then be able to revisit and relive well into the future. Maybe it's not much, but my guess is it's not nothing.



At this point, I can only plant the seed, so to speak, so that you can ruminate upon what I'm spelling out and possibly, one day, undertake this sort of campaign. Assuming some small percentage of you will eventually do so, let me give you a few words of advice before you sally forth.

First, having one player or at most two, is, I think, better than having a whole bunch of players. I've tried it both ways, and my sense is that having only one protagonist yields a more unified narrative that is simpler to follow and is simpler to referee as well. Multiple protagonists tend to force multiple perspectives within a single scene, also known as *head hopping*, and this breaks the narrative's flow and is disconcerting for the reader. For this reason, single-player campaigns are inherently more streamlined, and as an additional positive side effect, the player has the freedom to explore the setting without the sort of

concerns and constraints typical in multi-player campaigns. So I personally like it better, but your mileage may vary.

As for first versus third person, I'm running this campaign in the first person because, again, I think it's simpler, and it forces a greater depth of character on the part of the player, but if you prefer third person, I've gone that route as well, and it works, so use whatever you're most comfortable with. I'm not going to advise on this point, but you might want to try it both ways, presumably running different campaigns, to see how each suits you.

My second piece of advice is that you find yourself a co-referee, someone who you can at least bounce ideas off before you commit to them. A good co-GM can save you from making some ridiculous mistakes. Just take my word for it.

Incidentally, I call this single-player, multi-gamemaster approach *IPMG*, and I think it's a really interesting way to roleplay, as it flips the paradigm of the traditional multi-player, single-gamemaster framework, yielding very different sorts of narratives. I think it's really worth exploring, and I'm actually surprised that nobody else seems to be doing it.

My third piece of advice is that you need to be careful when choosing a player and/or co-referee. You need to find participants — co-writers, in effect — who share your vision of the setting, and they also need to fall into your camp when it comes to the question of role-playing vs. roll-playing (characterization vs. combat). If they're on one side of this fence and you're on the other, it might not work out. Finally, and this should be obvious, they need to like to write. If they hate writing, they're not cut out for PBEMing, because PBEMing *is* writing. You play it by writing. So this last one is sort of a requirement, I'm afraid.

Fourth, it's worth bearing in mind that this form of roleplaying straddles the line between PBEMing and authorship, so there's going to be

some natural tension between the two. For example, character flaws are considered so important in fiction that a seemingly perfect character will often be criticized as being a "Mary Sue" or "Gary Stu", and yet players often want to play an idealized, essentially flawless version of themselves. Indeed, they may push back against portraying the character with any meaningful flaws, thus depriving the protagonist of a realistic and sympathetic personality as well as a growth arc. All I can suggest here is that you talk about these issues with the other participants to make sure everyone is on the same page before you begin.

So now you have it, the bare-bones basics of what you can do to take your gaming to a whole new level, and like I said at the beginning, it's fun. If it wasn't fun, I wouldn't beckon you to give it a go. As for how much time it takes, that's up to you. The Plankwell Campaign consumes a few hours per week, less time than would be consumed running or even playing in a typical weekly face-to-face campaign, and due to the asynchronous nature of PBEMing, you can choose the specific hours. You don't need to be anywhere at any specific time. Each of the participants gets to fit it into their own schedule however they like, so that makes the organization aspect a *lot* easier.

If nothing else, this could be an avenue for you to scratch that gaming itch whenever it's hard to find local players. I'm in California. Timothy is in England. Our player is somewhere else, I'm not even sure where. You can do this sort of gaming with anyone anywhere, even an old gaming buddy who's moved away, and all you both need is email.

So it's something I hope you will consider. If you have questions or need any help, feel free to contact me. Otherwise, good gaming to you, and good luck.