

On Painted City: A Sample Profile for ENGL 112 at DeVry University in San Antonio

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I started playing role-playing games (RPGs) when I was an undergraduate in San Antonio. Each week, my friends and I would gather at one place or another to sit around, roll dice, and tell lies for hours on end; between the meetings, some of us would pore over the books from which our games emerged, working to make things better for the next meeting. I was lucky enough to be able to do so through all five years of my undergraduate coursework, and I was luckier, still, to be able to press on with doing so after I moved to graduate school. But in the following years, I was less able to find steady groups with which to meet and play, and I grew to miss the hobby I'd had for ten years and more by then.

Fortunately, I had been introduced in an oblique way to play-by-post RPGs (PBPs) while in graduate school. By plying connections I had made, I was able to play in one not long before I got married; the experience of doing so put me in touch with people I played with several times after. I evidently did well enough in those games to be invited to join the Shadows over Naishou PBP community and, after playing with it for a while, to be invited to help administer the Painted City side-game.

Shadows over Naishou refers to a campaign, a sort of ongoing storyline with recurring characters, within a specific gaming system. The side-game centered not on the main storyline of the campaign, but another story set in the same narrative milieu. In it, a minor noble was to be wedded to a city governor, but the governor proposed a challenge to her affianced. She declared herself hidden from him amid a large cast of actors and that he would need to uncover her identity to win her hand. Players in the game were given the task of persuading the groom who his bride truly was, as well as being presented with other story threads to follow or not at their leisure. Administering it meant that I was one of the people responsible for animating characters

other than the players', as well as describing and detailing the milieu in which the characters operated. I also had responsibility for some of the events being offered to players.

To be fair, in some ways, administering a PBP is a lot of work. The forums in which the game is played tend to populate quickly, so there is a lot of reading to do. Most RPGs require keeping track of fair amounts of information, including dice roll results and math. Players need to be handled well, their tempers sometimes soothed, and they need to feel included, which can take significant effort. Too, having more players means more of the interactions that occur in the game take place between them, but it also means there are more possible sources of conflict, both in the game and outside the game, and administering the game means negotiating all such conflict.

That said, administering the game was quite rewarding. Being in the position offers something like god-like power over the narrative milieu, and having such has its pleasures. Too, the Shadows over Naishou PBP community is international in nature, so I had the chance to interact with people far removed from me and learn from them, and for more of each day than I couldn't, but without the struggle of coordinating scheduled, owing to the asynchronous nature of PBP play. More, being in the position offers access to every player's stories, as well as the central stories of the side-game. RPGs are narratives, immersive and participatory; their charm lies in being able not only to read the stories left by others, or even to proceed along the narrative tracks laid down by others, but to be the one creating the story in collaboration with others. Playing the game allows for one story; administering the game allows for them all, affording more pleasure of story by affording many more stories. It is powerfully compelling, and it is something I am glad to have done.

I am also glad to know that the side-game will not be the last game. Even now, those administering the Shadows over Naishou PBP games are putting together another such, one back in the main campaign storyline. Another side-game is also in development, ready to go at most any time. In either event, the PBP environment offers much to its players and those who oversee them; it is a rewarding experience I look forward to having again and to sharing widely.