

ALRP

Author-led Role-playing

TL;DR

This is a game. You and everyone else participating are players, except one person who's the author because they periodically publish posts to their book which is how stories and other creations become canon. The author's post should always be around the same number of pages or word count. There may also be readers, who don't give feedback into what's published.

The author publishes their post from the book every two weeks, but the author and the players actually take turns writing. After the author publishes their post, the players have one week to read it and submit their comments and ideas. Just a couple sentences could be enough. After all the submissions have been collected, the author then spends a week writing another post. And so on, every two weeks.

How much of what the players write gets into the book could vary per the author and their mood that week. In addition to genre, setting, and other considerations, variations on the rules allow for interesting changes to gameplay.

What's the game like?

Since players don't interact face-to-face, it's a game of information and influence, of spies and henchmen, of alliances and betrayal. The actions a player can take are limited, so this may lead

players to consider their actions more carefully. And once their actions are decided, time passes before they learn of their success or failure, giving players a nail-biting experience not dissimilar to a general waiting to hear the outcome of a battle.

What to Expect

The author's goal is to balance the desires of the players, the readers, and themselves. However, the author always has the "final edit", so they're not obligated to accept any of the comments or suggestions submitted to them.

The book should be well paced with a limited number of active major storylines to give each story the room it needs to grow. Because of this, it may take time for player suggestions to make their way into the story, but even rejected ideas help the author better understand the players and the kinds of stories they're looking for.

Specific ideas are wonderful because creativity is a limited resource, but conversely, each player giving the author a general sense of what they're hoping to see makes balancing the storylines easier. It may take a few posts before the author and the group get a better idea of what kind of story the group is crafting, so players shouldn't feel rushed to decide everything about their characters or the stories they wish to tell.

Some players might find it more satisfying to have verbal conversations with the author, but a written, or at least digital, submission being the official submission makes it easier on the author and others who might want to learn more about your particular contributions and desires.

There's no need to feel self-conscious submitting something that others might read. If you like, ask the author to make your submissions private, and you can always let other people read it later, if you want.

How much of my time do I need to give to this thing?

The game is designed to be flexible, so it works on both ends of the engagement spectrum. To tackle the lower end, both the players and the author are each given a whole week to write something.

Players don't need to spend time perfecting their submissions because the submissions are just writing prompts for the author to use or ignore. The author mostly just needs the players' ideas about the characters and their opinions about what else is going on in the book. The author is trying to make this entertaining for everyone, so they'll definitely want to hear everyone's thoughts.

Thus, the game is a fun little distraction designed to have a satisfyingly slow burn, in the same way that reading the newspaper can be addictive. It fits into and entertains the odd moments of your week, making it small enough to allow people to share a role-playing experience together that wouldn't have otherwise because of time, location, or energy.

Your group can change the rules to be whatever you want them to be, but to be mindful of people's time, the author should try not to vary the publishing schedule or the length of the post too much from what people signed up for. By default, all extra content beyond the author's post is considered optional.

What if this is really cool and I have a lot of time?

On the higher end of the engagement spectrum, the game can be thought of as a blank canvas. Players should be encouraged to share their own creative endeavors.

If the author or a group vote deems your creation too disruptive to the plot, the author may not accept it as canon, but that makes it no less enjoyable as an artistic expression or a welcome part of the book's extended universe. Examples include digital art, cosplay, props, songs, poetry, or scenes that are acted out.

And of course, it's possible for players to contribute the written word as more than just ideas and suggestions. Some types of stories that players could write would be less disruptive, like flashbacks, dreams, or off-screen action, but either way, if you're hoping for it to be canon, work closely with the author.

Canon vs Non-canon

The way to win is to inspire more fun in your fellow players and readers, not a measure of how many of your ideas are adopted into canon or how much of the book is about your characters and storylines.

It's easy to fall in love with our creations, to feel attached, even identify with them, or care for them as if they were our real friends. We don't want to limit anyone's imagination, but your carefully crafted character may very well become fodder for the next story that comes along. I guess life sucks and then you die, even for fictional characters.

Even though the author completely controls every character when writing each post, there can still be ways to give the players a sense of control over their characters or other aspects of the

story. Players should work with the author if they're trying to tell a certain story with their characters.

Some authors or groups may be more suited to games where the player suggestions play a larger or smaller role in what's written. It's not better or worse for an author to mostly accept or mostly reject submitted ideas. Each game is its own experience, which players and the author learn from and become better role-players and writers. And part of the fun is not knowing what that experience will be until it's attempted. In the name of collaboration, even authors who find it difficult to accept ideas from others are still trying to open the door to their creative process, and that's great.

Variations

This game thrives on variations that can change the rules or the mindset for what this game is all about. Some ideas are detailed here, but the author and players should feel free to propose their own ideas. In general, it's probably better to adjust the rules before the book begins, so that players don't feel like the game is changing into something they're not interested in anymore. However, to keep the game fresh, engaging, and fun, the group can change anything at any time.

- Session Zero

A session zero is a session, either in-person or virtual, where players talk about the game and the characters they're planning on playing.

Letting the players offer their ideas and make decisions about the game will help them feel more engaged and excited for the game and the characters they're going to create for it. And it's a great way for players to intertwine the lives of their characters before the book begins, avoiding the awkwardness of having lots of characters who are strangers.

- Secrets

Secrets are private notes containing canon passed from an author to a player. This game mechanic allows for new forms of gameplay, such as competition between players or allowing plotlines to surprise some of the players once they're revealed. If secrets are used, the author will need to keep track of what each player knows.

Whether secrets are used or not, the author and players might want to keep track of what each of their characters know, unless there's some plot-based reason why their characters would share everything with each other.

Optionally, these personalized notes could replace the post entirely, such that no player can be sure what's common knowledge without having their characters make steps to discover what people know. This is great for spy genres or to emulate game-worlds where characters don't have a shared community where information is freely shared.

- Split the Timeline, Then Players Vote

When players submit ideas that are brilliant but too different to co-exist, the author can submit more than one post, each telling a different story. These posts can be voted on by the players and/or readers to decide which becomes canon and which is shelved. Or for that matter, maybe both realities continue to exist for a time until it's decided.

- Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens published his books in monthly installments that were around 25 posts long. If emulating this, give the author three weeks instead of one (or until the end of the month) to do the writing.

- The Daily Drip

Instead of releasing a longer post every two weeks, the author publishes smaller content more often, even daily. This allows players to provide a lot more feedback on how their characters are reacting to the plot.

- In Real-Time

Time within both the real world and the gameworld flow in sync. Whatever time your watch says is what time it is in the gameworld. This allows everyone to live with the characters and experience the weather and seasons along with them.

The types of characters that would be best are ones that are mostly busy with their normal lives or some other distraction. This allows players with busy lives to still play the game because the plot can easily handle any unexpected inactivity.

- Two Weeks is Two Weeks

The author may declare that each post will detail what happens during two weeks "in game", or some other set amount of time. Practically speaking, two weeks leaves enough room for each character to accomplish larger or repeated tasks. Two weeks is a long time for a story, so the more the author understands about your character, the more they can make decisions about the character that the player will be happy with.

- It's the News

The author's post reads less like a novel and more like a news bulletin. Inspiration can be found in our own newspapers or those from a different time or place, like colonial Virginia.

If the newspaper is "in game" as well, your characters will be made aware of whatever's in it, either through subscription or word-of-mouth. This can provide the interesting sensation of feeling entertained by the post while also vicariously feeling how their characters would be reacting to those words.

- It's not a Book; It's a Show

The book is now a show. The author is now the director. Each post is now an episode. And players might be actors. This variation may not change anything other than mindset, but it could lead the author to publish in the style of a screenplay style. That way, if certain scenes sound fun to act out (and possibly record), players have something good to work from. Or instead of the written word, the author's post could be a webcomic or an animated cartoon.

- Collaborate on Writing

The author can delegate their tasks either ad hoc or by designating different players to have certain titles. "Lead creative" makes the final decision about the plot or the direction of the story. "Lead writer" makes the final decision about exact wording. Or players can be given the chance to write the scenes related to the story or character arcs they wish to craft.

- The Post is a list of Writing Prompts

The post is a list of writing prompts for each scene. Each one can be picked up by anyone who wants to flesh out the parts of the plot that most inspire them. Each paragraph from the post

could be its own scene, detailing only an overview. And in the same way that a song can be covered, multiple people can make separate attempts at the same scene.

As always, the author would need to approve it before it's considered canon. In the case of multiple, duplicate entries that are acceptable as canon, one of them could be crowned the "most canon" in case there are minor differences that cause confusion or complication.

- The Post is a list of Acting Prompts

Similar to the above, but instead of writing prompts, it's an improv theater game. The scenes are written as acting prompts to be picked up by whoever wants to act them out. Providing a quote meant to mark the end of the scene might be a good tool for the actors to keep the game moving. Again, multiple people can take a crack at the same scene, and the characters needn't always be acted out by the player who "controls" that character.

- Personality Tests

It's good for the author to understand the personality and motives of the players' characters so that the author represents them in a way that feels true-to-character.

This might just be a short list of personality descriptors, quirks, accents, catch phrases, motives, or generally how they make their decisions. Optionally, players can take personality tests as their characters. Examples include Myers-Brigg, Big-5, or even just knowing which Hogwarts House they'd be in.

- If, then?

To assert more control over what your character would do or say, you can create a list of rules that follow the prompt "if, then". The higher up in the list, the more likely the rule will be used to describe the character's behavior.

Even if the author doesn't obey it, creating an "if, then" list for the player to explore their character's priorities, relationships, and perhaps their inner worlds.

- What If?

When the author prompts the player with a "what if", then it can be guessed that it's related to a storyline being considered. The author may ask you to keep their prompts secret until after they're published to the book.

- Followers

An excellent type of character to play as a player's main character is one who needs to stay put, forcing them to find others to do their bidding, such as hirlings, servants, slaves, sycophants, spies, friends, allies, or even enemies who are unwittingly the character's pawns. This allows the plot to be a bit more rough with these cannon fodder characters. In theory, there's no limit to the number of characters a player considers to be theirs, for as long as the author seems to be going along with it, that is.

In general, it's probably best to start out with one character that you feel to be your main character, with the others being extras, especially if you're new to role-playing. But ultimately, it's not overly important to differentiate between them.

- Character Creation

This variation favors character over plot or story. The player creates and fleshes out a character with the plan to ultimately hand the character over to the author, who is free to use them as yet another author-controlled character. The appeal to this style of play is the ability for players to create characters that are used in the game, and the author may appreciate the extra help with content creation.

- Players with no Main Character

A player may choose not to control any character for very long. This is good for a player who enjoys story writing or acting and prefers to embody new characters. In fact, the author and the players could try their hand at any of the characters, as if they were costumes they could borrow. And you can participate in this style of play while still also controlling other characters on a more long term basis.

- Borrowing from other Role-playing Systems

Any of the characters could be given character sheets from any role-playing system, from D&D to Monopoly. The players don't need to learn much of the rules, if any, but knowing the rules means they can get more involved in character creation and get a better idea of what their characters are capable of.

ALRP doesn't have the same time-pressures as a tabletop (face-to-face) session, so house rules and homebrew systems are easier to experiment with. The author could even take from

different systems, if that's what works well for the game being created. When the rulesets cover different aspects of the character, it might mean characters could have more than one character sheet.

- Playing with Tabletop Gamers

ALRP can be played on its own, but it's possible for tabletop sessions to be run in the same gameworld, creating interesting opportunities for interaction between the two styles of gameplay. To differentiate, those playing ALRP are called correspondence players and those playing a tabletop game are called conversational players.

Within the gameworld, the characters controlled by correspondence players could be the dominant, yet mostly off-screen, personalities that the characters in the tabletop game might encounter.

It's possible to be a player in both an ALRP game and a tabletop game in the same gameworld. The characters that such a player controls need not be allies. In fact, playing a hero in the tabletop game and their arch-nemesis in the ALRP game means that as a player, you'd have a lot more control setting up the sorts of challenges you're wanting your tabletop character to experience.