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“GOOD PLAY ISN’T THE SAME AS GOOD STORYTELLING”: INTERVIEW WITH ALEX ROBERTS

Alex Roberts & Stephen Shapiro

Abstract

Alex Roberts is a Diana Jones award-winning indie game designer. Roberts’s games include *Star Crossed* (2019), but it is *For the Queen* (2019, 2024) that has sparked a lineage of “Descended from the Queen” (DftQ) games informed by a System Reference Document (SRD). This interview discusses focuses on the changing nature of the collective player through repetition and player education by other players.

Keywords

interview, Alex Roberts, card games, *For the Queen*, player culture, education, mentorship, game mechanics

Stephen Shapiro (SS): *Let’s talk about For the Queen. How would you characterize it in terms of prep, mechanics, and form?*

Alex Roberts (AR): It is, quite intentionally, just a deck of cards. You take turns reading some of them in order, and that’s how you learn/teach the game’s mechanics and setting. That setting is pretty vague; your characters are accompanying a queen on a journey, and at some point that journey will be interrupted by an attack. Then you shuffle up the rest of the cards, which are a bunch of questions about your character and their relationship with the queen. You take turns reading the shuffled cards, answering them in character. That character emerges as you play, because the only things you know about them at the start are a) they’re accompanying a queen and b) the queen knows that they love her. Eventually someone draws the card that says “The queen is under attack. Do you defend her?” and everyone answers it in turn. My intent is to make that question as emotionally charged as possible by the time it shows up.

SS: *Often when we talk about indie tabletop role-playing games (indie TTRPGs), most of the attention goes to questions about game mechanics or the individual player’s experiences in gameplay—positive or negative— and questions about “bleed,” the post-play affect or emotional residue on the player. I was wondering if we could talk a little about the collective player and what*

kinds of social and cultural transformations take place through gaming that aren't so individual-based. Included in this is the question of group pedagogy, the ways in which players especially, rather than the GM, model or mentor new players into a shared perspective emerging from gameplay. How is it that one generation or cohort passes onward indie TTRPG culture in ways that the playbooks don't often comment upon? Sometimes playbooks talk about preparing an environment for gameplay (like what music or books to read or what foods to bring), but less so on what players carry forward beyond the gameplay (or so-called "magic circle").

AR: I have so much to say about this! TTRPGs are a different way of doing things. They have specific rules about who can say what, and when, and how decisions are made, and who has the power to know, enforce, validate, or change any of those utterances and decisions. These are social rules, and sometimes they can supplant or modify existing unwritten social rules. We're living under the crush of a global, totalizing capitalist realism, so we're constantly being told that things "have to be done this way." We're told this is the only economic system that works. We're told that whatever power dynamics currently exist are natural or inevitable – especially the power dynamic between humans and the land. Because they allow a group of people to create an imagined reality using a set of social rules, TTRPGs propose that there is a different way things can *be* and a different way things can *be done*.

For the Queen has a very small set of written rules. But, if you want to get through the instruction cards and still functionally be playing the game, you need to start internalizing its unwritten rules, which include: Set aside distractions. Listen to each other. Add your perspective rather than arguing someone else's. Let each person decide when their turn to speak is over and find an effective way to indicate to the next person that it's their turn. Offer what you have to say as a gift and be ready to receive nothing in immediate return. These are not necessarily the rules people are living by in their daily lives. I don't know the long-term effects of giving a group of people the experiential evidence (not just the idea) that they can operate by these rules and have a pretty good time. But I will keep doing it.

I haven't made games that have a traditional GM-and-party structure, but I'm not against that kind of hierarchy. I see it as a very fruitful place to explore how different kinds of authority and leadership can work. I would eagerly invite players to ask *why* and *how* their GM is the GM. Are they the person who happens to own all the books? Is it because they know all the rules, and if so, how do they go about teaching the rules to others? Is it because their most satisfying play is found in fulfilling the desires of other players? If so, how curious are they about those needs and how flexibly can they fulfill them? You can even ask if the role of GM is contestable in your group. Who can make changes to who is GM and how they GM? And how was any of this decided? Again, you can compare that to other systems of authority you participate in. And just notice the differences.



Figure 1: The box of *For the Queen* (Darrington Press, 2024). Photo by Alex Roberts. Used with permission.

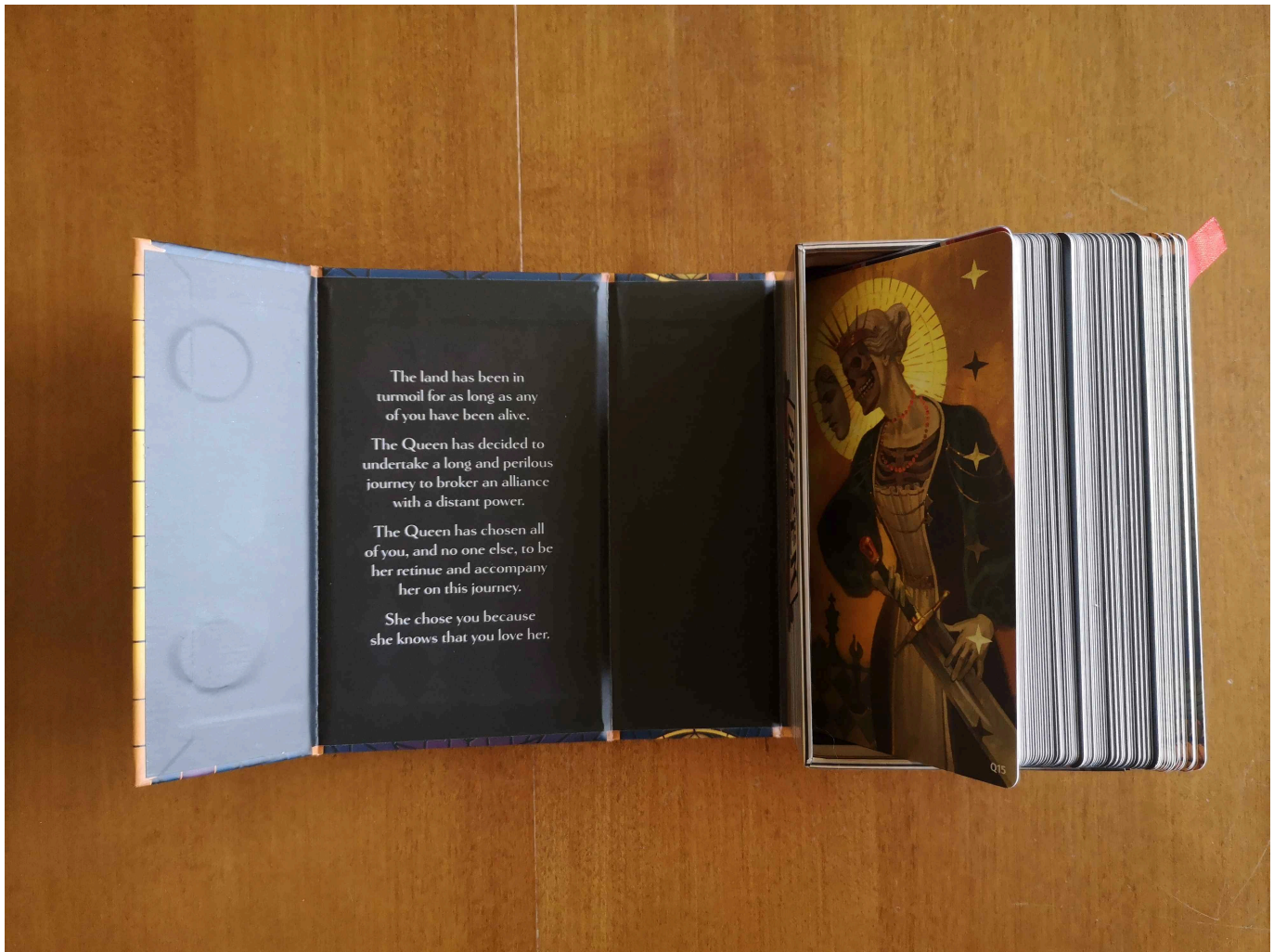


Figure 2: Inside the box of *For the Queen*. Photo by Alex Roberts. Used with permission.

SS: What differs when a player plays *For the Queen* a second time (a third? A fifth? and so on)? How do their responses to the prompts change?

AR: People start to take bigger creative risks after their first session. I don't mean getting silly. In fact, it's often quite the opposite. If they get a familiar question, they want to interpret and answer it in a deliberately different way. They start to stretch themselves a little, take creative license, interpret the text more loosely. You can call that vulnerability or authenticity or psychological safety. It's certainly an expression of agency. It's good play.

I notice that new players' contributions to the story change *over the course of the session* as well. In the first few turns, new players often keep their answers short and tend to have minimal impact on the story and its world. Over time their answers usually get bigger and bolder, as if they're realizing that, yeah, you really can say whatever you want. Others really will tap the [X] card if you're going in a bad direction. [Otherwise], it really will become true as soon as you say it. And everyone else really will run with it. As I mentioned above, experiential evidence of those rules is more powerful than just reading them on a card. It gives people license to expand the scope of their answers. I've

played with people who on their first turn give short statements like “I’m a stable boy,” and by their last turn are going wild about how this stable boy is a golem, and the Queen’s advisor created him, but she had the advisor executed, and even though he hates the Queen for that she is also his only parental figure so he longs for her approval. Big swings like that.

SS: *What differs when a player plays a Descended from the Queen game BEFORE they play For the Queen? And the reverse?*

AR: This I don't have enough data on! I can't think of a particular time when it happened, though I'm sure it has. I would love to hear about it.

SS: *What differs when the same group plays For the Queen a second time together (or sequentially, not as a one shot)? Alice is Missing (Starke, 2020) prohibits the same group from playing it twice. Would that matter for FtQ?*

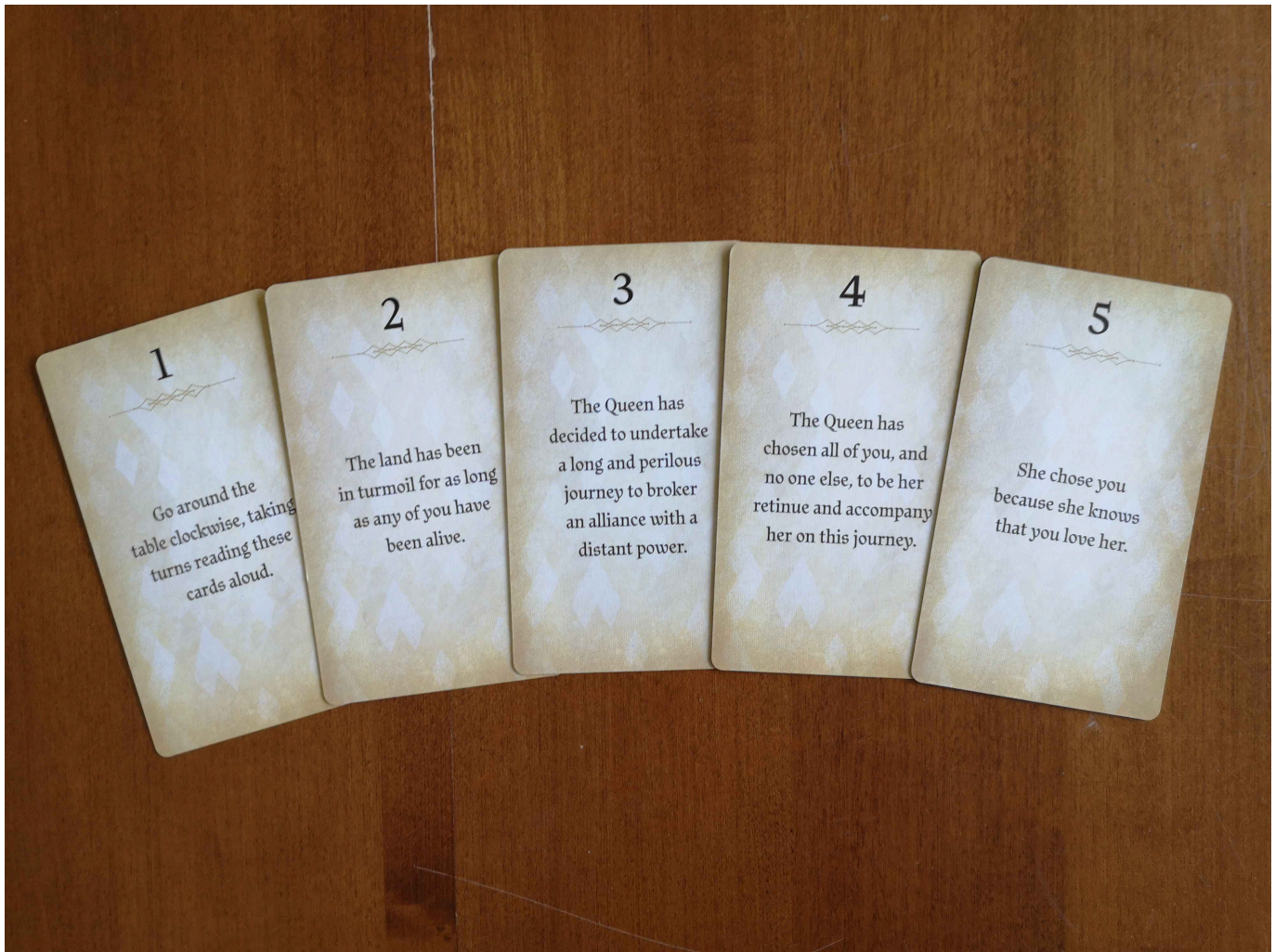


Figure 3: Set up cards. Photo by Alex Roberts. Used with permission.

AR: I've been at tables where we play a session in an hour or so and the whole group immediately asks to play again. The second game is usually better, because of the kind of development I mentioned in my last answer: more creative risk-taking, more depth and such. I've talked to people who have played many, many sessions together and everything just gets weirder and more interesting. The first session usually goes in a vaguely European-ish medieval-ish, fantasy-ish direction. The tenth game ends up with a premise like "by Queen, we mean the matriarch of our werewolf pack" or "prom Queen, and we are all her dates, and we each showed up thinking we were the only date" or "Queen bee, and we are her loyal drones, on a planet of bee-people." Those are all real examples.

You shuffle the prompt cards, and that creates some variation. More importantly, the game's text is only a tiny fraction of what gets said at the table. The *vast* majority of the game is coming from the players. And in a certain sense you're never the same player twice. Each person is an infinite well of experiences and ideas and influences and insights and feelings and memories and so on. I mentioned getting to know people through games, and I'm not just out here hunting for red flags. Play is an opportunity to behold another being. That's precious.

There's a lovely DftQ game called *Reunion*, by Jenn Martin, Andy Munich, and Yoshi Creelman (2023). From what I've heard, it was originally made as a follow-up to a session of *FtQ* the designers played together, to tell the story of their retinue long after their journey together ended. The questions are meant to be asked by one player to another, and they focus on the past. They're structured like "Remember the time we-," "Remember how you always-," and so on. I see TTRPGs as invitations to be creative. So that might be my ideal outcome as a designer: for the players to immediately start making their own game.

SS: *In what ways does a more experienced player of indie TTRPGs become a better player? What traits or skills are learned through experience?*

AR: More experienced isn't necessarily better. Some people who have played lots of indie TTRPGs or story games have developed their skills on purpose, either by observing other players or from learning about related skills like storytelling or theatre or group facilitation. **Reincorporation** comes to mind as an example. That's probably creative writing 101 (I don't know, I've never studied it) but when you are *in* the story where someone is taking elements other players introduced and building on those elements in their own answers, you *feel* how delightful it is and, whether or not you call it reincorporation, you want to do it again. Some games, like Epidiah Ravachol's *Swords Without Master*, make skills like that into explicit moves that are incentivized by the game's system.

Good play isn't the same as good storytelling, though. Good players **ask good follow-up questions**. An enticing, open-ended prompt to elaborate on what they've said, to think it through and go into more detail, is such a gift. It adds richness to the story, but it also signals to the players that what they say matters. You are interesting. Others want to hear you. That message adds more to the experience of play than any plot element or worldbuilding detail.

There are a lot of skills I could mention that all add up to the most important thing: **be a good audience to the other players**. That means listening to them attentively and then sharing your internal reactions to their input. Give genuine praise when you hear something you like. Show some enthusiasm and curiosity about the other players and their ideas! Though I should add: it has to be genuine. Fake interest is icky. And if you're not really interested in what your fellow players have to say, you would probably be better off with a different group or a different hobby.

Something I wish I had put directly into *FtQ*: **say the obvious thing**. This might sound like more of a choice than a skill but it can be hard. Sometimes we might get too shy to say anything. We might doubt our own ideas. Worst of all, we might think we need to be funny or clever for others to like us and have a good time. Just be obvious. Say it. You'll find that either what's obvious to you is unexpected and interesting to others, or your obvious is their obvious too, so they're already thinking about it and ready to build on it!



Figure 4: Prompt question cards. Photo by Alex Roberts. Used with permission.

SS: To those new to the hobby and who are only occasional players, what dynamics or skills should they gain?

AR: Slow your breathing and say the obvious thing. If you really want to get fancy, try to be a good audience to your fellow players: listen to them, ask good follow-up questions, and try to acknowledge and build on their ideas.

I might also need to add: don't try to emulate your favorite Actual Play performers. That's like imitating porn performers to try to have good sex. Talented and successful AP players are putting on

a good show, and that may have little to do with what makes for a good game. You are here to have fun together, not to entertain anyone. Offer what you have, say what you're interested in, and remain attentively curious to what others offer and express interest in. That probably applies to good sex too, actually.

SS: Andy Warhol's *Party Book* (1988) starts by Warhol saying that, "Sex and parties are the two things that you still have to actually be there for—things that involve you and other people." Maybe that's true for non-solo RPGs and larps as well. With this in mind, how could an experienced player aid a new one?

AR: Yes, sharing presence with someone means you can *model* saying the obvious answer, building on others' ideas, asking good follow up questions, and being a good audience. You don't have to explain much, just show them what makes for a good time and they'll start to do it too. Be an especially good audience to the new player. Certainly don't try to entertain them.

In addition: show some patience to new players. I see experienced players trying to "help" new ones by offering lots of suggestions on the new player's turn. This sends the message that they must come up with something really good, really fast, and this pressure undercuts their ability to contribute. In my experience, new players are often nervous and then doubt their own creativity. By being patient and relaxed, interested but not pushy, you're communicating that we're all having a good time, it's fine, they can relax and say whatever comes to mind.

SS: Were there instances when you feel that players changed in their relations with one another after playing (that is, not how they may have individually changed)?

AR: Yes. Almost every time, players like each other more after they play together. TTRPGs provide a lot of opportunities to build trust and understanding between people. I get to know someone very well when I play a game with them. I learn how they treat others – and not just how they treat me. I can observe whether they share their ideas tentatively, generously, or forcefully. Whether they take feedback with grace or defensiveness. Sometimes you can even learn something from what a player's *inaction* is like: attentive, disinterested, anxious.

I need to emphasize the *opportunities* part. I'm not that interested in team-building exercises, or trying to *create* trust and affection. I have observed that people tend to like each other more after repeatedly demonstrating prosocial behaviors and sharing an emotionally charged experience. I also think that people are generally pretty likeable and will get along if given the chance. But there is a world of difference between giving people opportunities to demonstrate trustworthiness and convincing them to trust each other. The latter might be more interesting to someone building a cult or an army or a loyal customer base.

SS: Has anything happened during an indie RPG that positively surprised you, something that was unexpected. And why do you think this happened and was it replicable?

AR: This one is the hardest to answer! In my experience, the unexpected is always popping up at the table. I ran *FtQ* for a creative writing group recently and an elderly woman drew the card: "You arranged for the Queen to be ambushed on this journey. What did they offer you?" Usually this card gets players talking about their character's motives for betrayal, their vices and weaknesses, their desperation... this lady just said, "six golden horses," and declined to answer follow-up questions. Magnificent. How to replicate that kind of surprise? I would guess you just need to keep playing with lots of different kinds of people.

Trying to recall a particular game that surprised me many times, I had a great session of *The Final Girl* (Gillan, 2016) at a house con a few years ago that I think about often. I'm squeamish about slasher movies so I wasn't enthusiastic about the game itself. I tried because a few players I really like and trust were playing, and they essentially said: we can tailor this to your tolerance for gore. We ended up telling what felt like a pretty unique story about the sister-wives of a cult leader (who was killed in the opening scene) being hunted by a vengeful mother bear. Or the ghost of one, maybe? I remember we kept cutting away from the physical violence, and referencing it obliquely - to show a piece of fruit being chopped up, a can being knocked off a shelf and rolling across the floor, things like that. I don't think that's an easily replicable experience. And I think I would lose something by trying too hard to replicate it. I certainly learned that it feels great to play at the edge of my limits, if I'm with people who respect those limits.

SS: *For D&D, there is OSR, a movement that seeks to restore aspects felt to have been lost. Is there something similar for indie TTRPGs (not nostalgia for the Forge)?*

AR: I know very little about the OSR, so I won't comment on that directly, but it's interesting to think about what kind of reflective/reactive impulses are at work in indie TTRPG design. When I first started playing and designing games, the designers I admired were all interested with pushing things into new, different, unexplored spaces. What's the furthest genre from heroic fantasy and how could I set a game in that? What if I wanted my characters to fail the worst instead of achieving the most and how could I incentivize that? Instead of dice, what's the weirdest thing I could use to provide randomness or resolve uncertainty? What's the smallest amount of text I could give players and have them still play a game with it? What if I was trying to make players cry instead of have fun? What if my game made crying fun?

Obviously, such impulses are not particularly compatible with commercial success. A commercially savvy designer asks a totally different set of questions. What's already popular and how could I make a game with or about that? What common desires is the current market of games not meeting and how do I design to appeal to those desires? What are the experimental, risk-taking designers doing and how can I water down one of their good ideas to make it palatable to a mainstream audience?

I've worked in both modes and both can produce games worth playing. (And, of course, there are many others: What kind of game will this nonprofit organization consider worth funding? What does this one specific person like in a game and how could I prioritize them? What game do I enjoy but find flawed and how could I improve it?) But indie design, to me, is driven by that expansive, curious, boundary-pushing impulse. I describe these as impulses rather than decisions because I think they are constructed primarily by economics and the material conditions of game designers rather than some individually generated philosophy. When your conditions are characterized by a profound economic precarity and an ever-increasing availability of ways to commodify your every move, those conditions will produce sets of internal and shared discourses focused on how to succeed in the market. Pushing back against that is difficult but extremely gratifying. It feels counter-cultural to make something you don't intend to sell! Nightmarish but true.

Oh! Wait! Maybe I'm activating that reflective, nostalgic impulse in indie game design *right now*. "Remember when it was all about making something weird and new and challenging?" Did I just imagine a past that I can now yearn for? Maybe I could even commodify it! Oops!

SS: *Can we end by asking what DftQ games do you personally like or think are the most successful?*

AR: I really like *Brave the Dreamer* (Huang, 2024). It's about characters who fell into a fantasy land as children and then encounter each other as teens on an early internet forum. It pulls a particular heartstring: the warmth of knowing someone understands you, and the pain of knowing they're so far away. The glimpse of belonging that reminds you how rarely you feel it. *Viva la Queer Bar* (Dahlhoff and Rick, 2023) was one of the first *DftQ* games I played, and it has *such* strong questions. One of the authors, Sandra Dahlhoff, ran it for me and we talked about inquiry and invitation for a long, long time afterward.

I also have a particular love for *Decaying Orbit* (Icarus, 2023). I know Sidney Icarus started working on it from a place of *dissatisfaction* with *FtQ*, which makes it kind of an unacknowledged descendant. (Bastards of the Queen?) The design does everything *FtQ* doesn't: takes pains to place things in time, makes players think about the past and future in separate ways, and has players sharing a character (the AI running a doomed space station) instead of being independent characters all talking about a third party. It also ends with everyone composing a poem together, instead of the cliffhanger/cut-to-credits ending. I love it as an experience, but also as an example of how inspiring it can be to design from what you *don't* see, not just from what you want to imitate.

SS: *Thanks so much for these thoughts. I feel like they're third-eye chakra opening insights!*

AR: Well, be careful; I think Shiva's third eye opening is what knocked Ganesh's original head off. That's what I heard, anyway. It probably depends who you ask.



Alex Roberts is a noted game designer of *Star Crossed* (Bully Pulpit Games, 2019), which received the 2019 Diana Jones Award for Excellence in Gaming, *Pop!* (found in the anthology *Honey and Hot Wax*, Pelgrane Press 2020), *Our Time on Earth* (2020), *Rat Trash Party* (2021), as well as *And To All a Good Night* (2022). *For the Queen* was first published by Evil Hat Productions in 2019 and reissued by Darrington Press in 2024.

Stephen Shapiro teaches at the University of Warwick in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies. He has written on Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) games with "No 'Monsters': A Manifesto for Contemporary Gothic, Horror, and Weird (GoHoW)."