

A REVIEW OF 2014

in the world of story games

***The Big Caveat** – There is no centralised source of data for story games published or played so this review is entirely based upon what I've seen or heard about in the story game community. The listing of new games is mainly taken from Story Games Weekly compiled by James Stuart and Popular Con & Meetup games is taken from Games on Demand events who keep a record of games played or events who have a public schedule of games played. I intend it to be representative rather than definitive. This data came from GenCon, London Indiemeeet, Big Bad Con, Dreamation, Origins, Concrete Cow, Gaspscon, UK Games Expo and Nine Worlds. My thanks to those who helped provide it.

This Year's Popular Con & Meetup games*

1. **Monsterhearts** (2012)
2. **Fate** (latest ed. 2013)
3. **Dungeon World** (2012/3)
4. **Fiasco** (2009)
5. **Apocalypse World** (2010)

*Data taken from approx. 900 sessions
Over 200 different games played
Total Top Five accounted for ~20%
AW systems accounted for ~20%

Getting paid

As much as Kickstarter popularised crowdfunding for indie rpgs and there's been some big fundings in 2014, indie creators have flocked to set up **Patreon accounts**.

"The product that Patreon works for is one with low to no overhead and upfront costs and is a product you would be producing regardless of whether or not you have any patrons." Dyson Logos, Creating Maps & Adventures for OSR RPGs interviewed by CrowdCrux about his success on Patreon

I think that this is a great fit with the indie rpg product—with 'payment after' rather than 'payment before' and an expectation of digital rather than physical product—avoids much of the misery around missed deadlines and unhappy backers from troubled Kickstarter projects.

Patreon is intended for creators who produce a steady stream of material, but not every designer is looking to write a new game every month; one of the early adopters, designer Epidiah Ravachol, is making Patreon work with the format of the fiction and gaming ezine with Worlds Without Master.

PDF pricing of the games I saw varied from \$2 to \$27 with the most common set prices at either \$5 or \$10. Just under half of the games released were free with another dozen listed as **Pay What You Want**. I first encountered it in rpgs with the Bundles of Holding, which have guaranteed that I will always own more games than I've played. If it ever had been before, shortage of games to play will not be a problem in the future.

There's also been **music/sound** being marketed specifically for rpgs: the Tabletop Audio website in Jan and Patreon in July; the Gumshoe Music Bundle in August; Ambient Environments Kickstarters in July and Nov; James Semple music for 13th Age and seminar at Dragonmeet.

What we've played

Games using the Apocalypse World engine predominated in available con/meetup gaming data, providing three of the top five, eight of the top fifteen and 20% of the total play.

The most popular newly released games in 2014 likewise used AW (Urban Shadows, Night Witches, Dream Askew) and Fate (Atomic Robo). The most popular non-AW/Fate new game was Swords without Master falling just outside the top ten.

Despite this, the majority of indie story games played are using game-specific rule-sets.

How we've been playing

Online play – I've observed greater opportunities and uptake of online play—both synchronous (through G+ Hangouts and Roll20) and asynchronous (through Storium and G+ drive sharing).

Shorter one-shots – While the standard one-shot length remains that of a standard session (roughly equal to an evening's play), I've observed more play of games designed to play closer to a boardgame session of around 1 hour or shorter.

Longer one-shots – I've also observed story gamers seek out games that can be played over the course of a day or over 3 or 4 linked sessions in a mini-campaign.

I infer that time-poor gamers can struggle with meeting regular scheduled commitments and like smaller games for evening play. When they do clear the decks to game (e.g. when attending a convention) some have a desire to have a longer, more involved game than the standard 3-4 hour one-shot session.

Larps have been running at dedicated and cross-gaming conventions for years, however, I've observed increased exposure of the relatively new **American Freeform larp** (coming from the Nordic larp tradition) to indie story gamers and organisers including them in convention offerings.

As well as perennial frequent topics such as GM advice, I've seen a lot of articles and posts around how to encourage **greater representation** of different races, sexual orientations, genders and physical abilities within the story game community. This has gone from the high level of overall event organisation down to the details of how individual games are designed.

Over the last few years, I've seen greater interest in discussion of **roleplaying 'techniques'**. With separate publications from prior years such as Playing with Intent and Play Unsafe and the impact of the Principles from Apocalypse World, I feel that game designers are increasingly considering them as common knowledge which can be omitted from shorter games (much like the 'What is an RPG?' section).

Some Games released*

A Pervasive Larp by Rafu
A Werewolf at Prom
Abnormal
Agent Down
Alienør
Ar-Agôn: The Fellowship
Arkfall
Atomic Robo RPG
Atop a Lonely Tower
Base Raiders
Becoming
Bootleggers
Brigade of Four
Bugs of Venus
Callisto
Captain's Log
Chuubo's Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine
Dead Teenager
Death of the Gilded Age
Deeds and Doers Cardpanion
Deep Carbon Observatory
Den of Thieves
Deniable
Double Cross
Dream Askew
Exodus 22:18
Firefly
Forever Summer
Four Panels
Funnel World
Golden Sky Stories
Gossamer Worlds
Havoc Brigade
I Lost My Journal on Zont
Indie Mixtape: Volume 1
Infotech Team: Rage And Betrayal
Isotope
Kaleidoscope
Legacy of the Slayer
Life on Mars
Midsummer Wood
Mindjammer
Motobushido
Mythender in Golarion
Nod
One Last Job
Out of Dodge
Planet Crashers
Posthuman Pathways
Powers for Good
PULSE
Questlandia
Remodel
Schoolgirl RPG
SexyTime Adventures
Shamblington
Skein
Sorceress Bloody Sorceress
Tech Support
Temporally Excellent Adventures
The Beekeeper
The Clay That Woke

What's been released

I noted around 80 separate games released during the year (though the true number is likely far higher). This includes hacks, nanogames and American Freeform larps pitched at story gamers.

2014 was Powered by the Apocalypse – Not only did PbtA games dominate play, PbtA also dominated design. Around 10% of new games released either explicitly used the PbtA game engine or claimed direct ancestry back to AW.

In 2014 I saw several 'second generation' AW hacks (hacks of hacks of AW). The award-winning designer of Fiasco, Jason Morningstar, picked PbtA for his latest game, Night Witches. A designer has used it as the basis for a board game and - while most PbtA games change up the game setting - 2014 saw not one but three Apocalypse World hacks set in the post-apocalypse released this year (Dream Askew, Isotope, Legacy). I feel the PbtA tag is sometimes now being used not merely as a design choice but also as a promotional choice to tap into the AW fanbase for little-known designers looking for ways to encourage gamers to give their game a second look.

I saw a small trend in games released set in or strongly influenced by **Japanese culture**, the most notable of these focusing on, what I'm going to call, '**heart-warming roleplaying**' (Golden Sky Stories, The Whispering Road, Chuubo's Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine).

Another small trend was in light-hearted games placing the players as **petty evil** characters (Havoc Brigade; Goblin Quest; No Country for Old Kobolds; Welcome, Minions!)

The Few
The Fifth World
The Homecoming Collection
The J. Tuomas Harviainen Larp Collection
The Ladykillers
The Secrets of Cats
The Shadow Puppet Theatre
The Thought Police
The Warren
The Whispering Road
Tianxia: Blood, Silk & Jade
Trapped
Unsung Tales
Welcome, Minions!
Wield
Wolfspell
Workplace Bully
World of Dew
World Wide Wrestling

Check out back issues of Story Games Weekly for more about most of these.