

Questions Without Answers

By Nathan Rockwood

Larcenous Designs

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WHAT CAN CHANGE A PERSON'S VERY NATURE?

HOW CAN THE BROKEN BE MADE WHOLE?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A HERO?

In a world where most people still dismiss genre fiction as 'trash' or 'pulp,' it should be no surprise that role playing games don't have a reputation for literary value. And, to be fair, I can understand why: most adventures are just for fun, and are not intended to be particularly literary.

On the other hand, though, neither are most novels written to be literary, and I don't see anyone pointing at *Twilight* and saying, "See? If that's a book, books can't possibly be literature!"

While not *all* games *should* be literary, the stories we tell with them *can be literary experiences*. And one thing that separates literature from 'trash' (even fun, satisfying trash), at least for me, is the asking of a grand question.

So, drawing on more than two decades of combined gaming and teaching experience, I offer a list of 50 *Questions Without Answers*, and brief advice on using them in three ways: As a player running a character with a grand question, as a GameMaster planning a story with literary drive, and as a game designer who wants to support this kind of play.

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QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

What can change a person's very nature?
How can the broken be made whole?
What does it mean to be a hero?

Asking questions like those above isn't generally the first thing I do when planning a game, but at some point they start drifting around in the back of my mind. Eventually, one will push its way into the story, guiding my choices and the challenges I present to the players. Characters become embroiled in complex crises, motivations are unpacked and examined, and things start to feel more like a novel than I would have ever expected in my early days as a GM.

Of course, the comparison to a novel or movie isn't something particularly new, and many games have gone to great lengths to make it possible to include all the trappings of their particular genre of fiction. Plots with deep arcs and foreshadowing; villains with believable, even understandable motivations; heroes with flaws that make them relatable or tragic.

But academia is so slow to embrace change and new media that, as of 2016, even well-written genre fiction is still often dismissed as 'trash' or 'pulp,' and games don't warrant a second glance. To be fair, I can understand why, since most games and most campaigns are just for fun, and not intended to be particularly literary.

On the other hand, though, neither are most novels, and I don't see anyone pointing at *Twilight* and saying, "See? If that's a book, books can't possibly be literature!"

I don't mean to suggest that all games should be literary, but that, just like books and movies, the stories we tell can be literary experiences. Speaking as an English teacher, enjoying new forms of literature is significantly more satisfying than the snobbery of stuffy academics.

And part of what defines 'literature,' for me, is the exploration of a grand question.

When it comes to a novel, the answers to these big questions are often discussed as themes of the text, lauded as 'universal truths,' or written about as 'the message of the work as a whole.' But those answers are secondary. As literary critic Roland Barthes famously said, "literature is the question minus the answer."

While the best example I've ever seen of a game intentionally asking a big question is the classic computer-based RPG from Bioware's Black Isle Studios, *Planescape: Torment*, I've also seen the tactic work well in games I and others have GMed, or be a happy accident that arises because of player investment in the story and its characters. So here I'm presenting a list of 50 *Questions Without Answers*, and brief advice on using them in three ways: As a player running a character with a grand question, as a GameMaster planning a story with literary drive, and as a game designer who wants to support this kind of play.

WHY BOTHER WITH 'GRAND QUESTIONS?'

Who cares if games can be literary? Does that matter?

Games that ask questions can still have great gameplay. They don't sacrifice that, but rather add to it! Take video games as an example, and look at fan reactions to heavily thematic games like *Planescape: Torment* and *Mass Effect*, as compared to less narratively dense RPGs like *World of Warcraft* and *Skyrim*. They are all successful, well-received games, but appeal to different audiences in different ways.

While there are already tabletop game systems and campaigns out there that encourage real thought, they are comparatively few and far between... and the best, most literary moments in them are the results of actual play, which are hard to capture and publish.

That is why we should bother with grand questions: Not only will we get more out of our own games, but we can also create more opportunities for others to see why we love gaming. As academia is starting to embrace video games as literary, let's remind them where those games came from!

A PLAYER'S QUESTIONS

One way to add a drive to your character, or to provide a motif for the GM to use as an ongoing series of adventure hooks for you, is to try and fail to answer one of these questions.

Why must you fail? First, to paraphrase the late Terry Pratchett, those who seek the truth make far better companions than do those who think they've found it. You don't want to overwhelm and drown out your fellow players' motivations and stories, and a character who believes they know the answer to a great, universal question is unlikely to let it rest at that. Second, the very nature of these questions makes them difficult to answer definitively, and therein lies their beauty. You may find one or more possible answers to a question, and decide you have unlocked its meaning to your particular character, but that won't happen if you worry about finding the 'ultimate' answer. If that were likely to be possible, philosophy wouldn't involve so many debates and/or stonings.

I recommend either selecting a question that fits your character's backstory, or picking a question and then building a backstory that has led you to ask it. A character who wonders *"How far will you go to protect yourself?"* is likely to have been forced into some kind of difficult choice, perhaps something like:

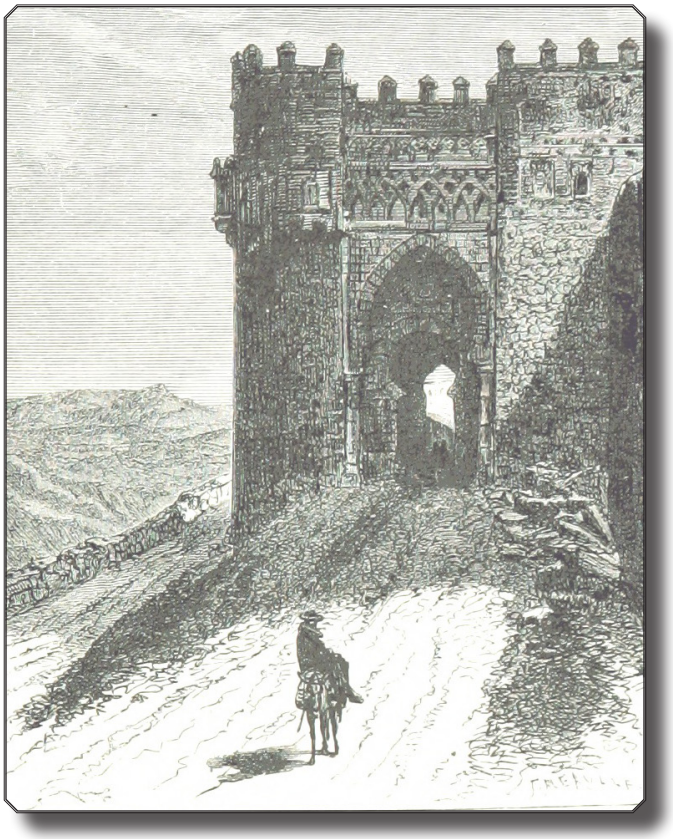
When you were younger, you were caught by the Tyrant's secret police and had to choose between execution and 'confessing' to a crime that never happened, implicating a friend and sending them to their death. Now you feel both guilty and blessed. You've already done something terrible to stay

alive, and the only way to seek atonement in your friend's memory is to keep living, but that means you are always worried: How far will you go to protect yourself? Are any *of your loved ones safe from you?*

When you have a question, everything will look like a nail. Or a hammer. Or whatever. Point is, though, if you really do want to make a question a major part of your character, then just having it in mind will help. All of a sudden, gameplay decisions that used to be mechanical may suddenly become role playing opportunities. Who should stand watch? Who should scout ahead in the cave? Is it better to purchase magical armor, or should you get that one-use potion of escape that would let you survive a fight at the cost of abandoning your friends?

On a grander scale, the quests and goals you undertake will certainly be colored by your questions. Is money enough reason to put yourself in danger? Will you find yourself sympathizing with some enemies? And if so, how will you respond? At what point will you abandon a quest because it got too dangerous, and what will be the consequences of that?

And, perhaps most dramatically, what will finally drive you to stand your ground and risk death? To ride alone into danger? If you reach that point and survive, you'll have learned much about yourself, and need to find a new question to ponder. If you don't survive, it will still have been an epic moment, much more emotionally charged than if you had fought your last stand just because you wanted more cash.



A GAMEMASTER'S QUESTIONS

If you haven't yet, read the above section on being a player with a question; here, your goal is to support that style of play!

One thing you need to consider first is: Will your game have a single overarching question, or are you merely helping players enjoy seeking answers to their personal questions? You can do either singly or both together, but they are quite different things to plan for.

To support your players directly, you need to know what their questions are. Encourage them to build backstory that supports their initial question, and perhaps allow some flexibility with the fiction of your world if it helps (it might be difficult to arrange an appropriate backstory if, as a player, you have no narrative control over NPCs and world events). Take note of their questions and the implied answers they seem to be looking for, and then consider pre-planning one or more 'drop-in' encounters that would have some bearing on each question. Keeping those handy will allow you to use them when the timing feels right, and will hopefully prevent you from feeling too rushed to organize an interesting crisis.

Similarly, if you have a question you want the whole party to confront, remember that the question is not the same thing as a questline, but can still be partially planned in advance. To avoid railroading your players down a very specific plot, consider prepping a number of different circumstances that might force a conflict over your question, but which aren't directly related to each other in terms of order, NPCs, and plot threads. Then, regardless of what goals your players set and seek for themselves, you can draw on these encounters when they fit naturally into the story. In addition, you could also make your question the basis for NPCs and their motivations. You may want to use this as a carefully planned way to approach your overarching thematic question... or you simply use these existential conundrums to give your NPCs a bit of life, selecting a new question at random when creating each of them.

One way to force the characters to confront major questions, regardless of whose questions they are, is to provide a twist in the traditional "get quest, solve quest, get quest reward" pattern. Perhaps it becomes clear that the princess being rescued is in fact running away, not being kidnapped. A group of thieving bandits might be an oppressed group barely surviving an attempted genocide. A new and more urgent quest might come up, forcing a decision between earning their reward and doing the right thing.

However, I caution against making such a 'twist' into an opportunity to show off your own answer to whatever question you are hoping to ask. If you merely reveal that a quest or employer was "actually evil the whole time!," then you aren't really forcing any debate or discussion, and are letting the player characters discover more about the NPC who hired them than about themselves.

INSPIRATION FOR GMS AND GAME DESIGNERS

Playing Bioware's *Planescape: Torment* and Looking Glass Studios' *Thief* series in high school led me down the rabbit hole that eventually brought me here, working as a game designer, so I know how powerful an inspiring game can be. I've worked hard to capture that same spark in games I run, and to make it easy to do so in games I create. Here are some games that I've drawn on while writing *Questions Without Answers*; perhaps they will inspire you in turn.

In the realm of computer and video games, I thought back to *Shadow of the Colossus, Mass Effect, Deus Ex, Knights of the Old Republic, The Longest Journey, Gone Home, Life is Strange, Telltale's The Walking Dead, Bastion, Transistor, Undertale, Portal, Bioshock,* and *Vampire: The Masquerade: Bloodlines*.

Tabletop RPGs I found myself thinking about while writing this include the now-out-of-print *Everway, Mechanical Dream*, and *Amber Diceless*; the classic and new World of Darkness games (especially *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Mage: The Ascension*); and sundry other games, such as *FATE, Apocalypse World, Ars Magicka*, and Monte Cook Games' *Numenera*.

As a general rule, if you want moral, ethical, or intellectual challenges to be effective, you have to start by making it look like *everyone* is wrong. At that point, the PCs can try and decide who is *least* wrong, or attempt to pose their new, previously-not-thought-of solution to the problem.

The princess may be running away, but perhaps she is unaware that her father is dying and won't live to see her again unless she comes home now, though coming home might mean she never has another opportunity to live her own life as she chooses. Perhaps the home of the group of bandits was targeted by a genocidal foe, but these bandits, now the last of their race, only survived because they were already war criminals hiding in the mountains before their village was attacked. Suppose that the PCs can only save their kingdom by destroying an innocent one, diverting the disaster to another target...

Regardless of how well or poorly such a moment goes, and whether or not the players go with what you thought was the 'best' idea, it is important to reward the *attempt* to answer the question, and NOT the final decision. Perhaps you can offer experience, plot points, or even loot or in-world magical power for player characters who invest themselves in what they do, and who don't merely hack goblins and bandits apart without a second's thought. This is something you should discuss with the players before the game, so they know that they can consider it mechanically worthwhile to explore the implications of what they are doing, and let you know what kinds of impacts and rewards they think fit their characters and their story. Setting clear expectations is critical, and you might even be surprised at how much easier it makes your job, once you know what the players want.

A DESIGNER'S QUESTIONS

If you haven't yet, you should read the above two sections first, since it will help to consider the GMing and play that you are building a game to foster!

Because role playing games are (frequently, anyway) so flexible when compared to other games, it is important to remember that a determined GM can probably integrate big questions and ethical dilemmas into a story they're telling in almost any system. As such, this section isn't so much about how to *allow* GMs to do that, but how to *encourage* them to. It is also far from a complete guidebook on the subject of designing impactful games. That would require a much longer text, and a much deeper level of research, so I first want to make it clear that I am not claiming ultimate knowledge here. However, speaking as both a developer of games and a teacher of literature, I want to offer any insight I can. I hope it proves useful!

To start, let's discuss building *Questions Without Answers* into your character generation and advancement systems. Whether your intent is to have a campaign or adventure center around a single question, or to have each player tackle their own, you should make sure that the players and the GM are thinking about these things before play begins (even if they don't have a specific question yet, the psychological preparedness for asking it will make it easier for them to come up with one during play).

Consider offering player characters benefits like skills, abilities, or advancement points for asking and attempting to answer questions, and perhaps even make that the sole or primary experience mechanic. Pushing character evolution as tied to the exploration of serious topics will help keep both GMs and players focused. For some examples of similar mechanics, check out the old card-based RPG *Everway* from Wizards of the Coast, which gave players a goal to strive for, and *Numenera* from Monte Cook Games, which rewards discovery rather than victory.

Also, consider the rules you provide to structure play. Most traditional tabletop RPGs focus on moving characters between scenes of dialogue and action, often switching between different granularities of mechanical play as they do. Round-by-round, action-by-action rolls take place in combat or danger, and broader, much more loosely defined rules are used in almost any other situation.

Because the bulk of mechanics focuses on battle, that is where most of the time spent playing gets used up. That isn't actually bad, but you should keep it in mind; if you want to focus players on something other than combat, or if you want time to be spent more equally on the

many other things to do, your mechanical complexity should reflect that. It should be obvious that if there are no mechanics that reflect a character's state of mind or attempts to answer questions, those things will fade into the background. Consider bonuses and penalties that might result from confusion, dissatisfaction, arguments with allies, the testing of personal conviction, reactions to new and untested situations…

Many games already do this, but most do it on a small scale because it comes more naturally. Vampire games tend to center on the loss of humanity and the self. Cyberpunk games deal with questions of transcending limitations and the relative values of freedom and security. Epic fantasy is often about heroism and self-sacrifice.

If you are interested in making a game that explores just one particular question or set of questions, consider what narratives are best suited to your potential themes, and use those to pick a genre, setting, or flavor. A big killer of fun in a generic game is that attempts to be broad and universal require either a shallow, vague approach, or an overwhelming amount of reading and remembering. Don't be afraid to be as specific as you like!

Lastly, communicate your design goals to your future readers. Like the mechanics of your game, the advice you offer GMs and players will have a significant impact on how they engage with the story. Take the time while writing your game to clarify your intent.

If you want players to be forced to confront big, personal questions every session, you should tell them that. If the GM should be preparing a climax for the story that involves making a final decision on a topic they have been exploring the whole time, you should lay that out as the goal of the game.

Of course, many GMs and players will choose to skip or ignore your advice, but while you can never guarantee that people will play the game as you designed it, it will ensure that players at least have the opportunity to share your vision!

THE QUESTIONS THEMSELVES

What you do with these ideas is up to you. However, to help you get started, on the next page you will find a table containing 50 *Questions Without Answers*, labeled for easy randomization with a d100.

While randomizing such a major influence on my game isn't my personal preference, it can sometimes kickstart new ideas. If you can't think of any other way to make these work for you, but you want to give them a try, just make a roll and build the result into your character's background, a new encounter or quest, or your game's main themes!

The phrasing of the questions is intentionally varied through a few common styles, but they all avoid simple yes or no answers. Feel free to change the exact wording of any given question to whatever suits your use:

A player character might wonder, "What will I sacrifice for love?"

A GameMaster could ask her party, "What will you sacrifice for love?"

A game designer might pose the question, "What will we sacrifice for love?"

I also tried to tackle some demanding subjects in more than one way, showing how a tiny shift can make a crucial difference. Some of the questions may inevitably sound a tad repetitive, but I hope that if you examine them further, you will find the subtle variations in meaning significant.

In the end, what really matters is what matters to you. If these questions don't work for you, throw them out and start afresh! Ask your players what questions they would like to explore. Revisit existential conundrums that left you mystified. Explore the truth and nature of your game's world, and you may find yourself learning something important about ours!

But, of course, don't stop having fun. If these suggestions don't appeal to you, then play in the way you love best, and I thank you for reading!



QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

1-2	For what would you sacrifice those you love?
3-4	Against what do you weigh a single life?
5-6	Who do you serve?
7-8	What is the worst thing a person can do?
9-10	What is worth dying for?
11-12	How much can you lose and still be you?
13-14	How is it best to be remembered?
15-16	What value do memories hold?
17-18	What is the worst pain one can feel?
19-20	What does it mean to be great?
21-22	What will we sacrifice for love?
23-24	What will we sacrifice for revenge?
25-26	What should we fear the most?
27-28	Why do we keep secrets?
29-30	What is freedom worth?
31-32	What is worth believing in?
33-34	How can you help?
35-36	What is best in the world?
37-38	Who can you trust?
39-40	Where should you go?
41-42	How much can a person endure?
43-44	How far will you go to protect yourself?
45-46	What is worth killing for?
47-48	What value do you bring to our world?
49-50	What is worth living for?
51-52	How far will you go to help others?
53-54	How can the broken be made whole?
55-56	What is justice?
57-58	What is the highest virtue to strive for?
59-60	What defines true evil?
61-62	What does it mean to sin?
63-64	How can evil be redeemed?
65-66	What does it mean to be human?
67-68	What does it mean to be a hero?
69-70	What is a villain?
71-72	What can change a person's very nature?
73-74	Why do we lie?
75-76	What is your price?
77-78	What does it mean to grow up?
79-80	What is the true cost of power?
81-82	What does it mean to be safe?
83-84	What does it mean to be alive?
85-86	What defines a person?
87-88	What does it mean to die?
89-90	What defines art?
91-92	What is real power?
92-94	What is beauty?
95-96	What is true love?
97-98	What makes a family?
99-00	What makes a leader?