

Writing for Shared Worlds Gencon Indianapolis - 2002

This panel happens every year as part of the writing track at Gencon. There are, generally, between five and seven participants on the panel; all of whom are writers and editors in the subgenre of "Shared Worlds." While these are notes from 2002, I've attended this panel off and on for seven years and what is in this write-up covers the basics from every single year.

A note for those not familiar with the lingo - Shared Worlds are books written in a series by different authors by contract. Star Wars and Star Trek novels are franchise versions of Shared Worlds. DragonLance and Forgotten Realms are another type of Shared World series in which the world is based not on a television show or movie but on the base rules for a game. Television tie-in books for shows like Transformers, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and such are also Shared Worlds. When you do this for your own enjoyment they call it fan fiction. When you get a contract for a novel and get paid by the parent corporation, you call it Shared Worlds.

By the way, don't bring up fan fiction to the authors in this panel. They get very testy about fan fiction. Downright defensive and combative. Having their work compared to fan fiction sets them off and you will get nothing else productive out of them for at least ten minutes of the hour allotted. It's a waste to spend those ten minutes poking the hive with a stick and getting nothing but vitriol.

How to get into writing for Shared Worlds

All of the writers and editors (most are both) on the panel concur that the way to become an author for shared worlds (in particular for gaming worlds) is to publish in Dragon Magazine, SW Insider, or to get work with West End Games. All of these folks (and more) are represented at Gencon and have informational sessions for those interested in writing for them which covers the topics they will focus on for the coming year, where to find their style guides, and other such important information. Once you are known in the gaming community (in particular by editors) they will start calling, emailing, or writing to you to ask you for specific topic articles or for blurbs to put in gaming books. If you prove yourself to have a) command of language, b) be able to work to deadline, and c) show you can write specifically requested topics you will get a rep and you are likely to hear from someone putting together an anthology.

Also, you can send in short stories to various periodicals and get a fiction rep. Some houses and periodicals run contests and winning one of these will also get you some buzz.

For the most part, gaming companies and others do not accept unsolicited manuscripts for novels. Wizards of the Coast still does so but most of the time a publisher will not bother to read a full novel treatment if you send it to them unsolicited. What they want, assuming they want unsolicited work at all, is a detailed outline and the first three finished chapters. Some also would like to have character sheets. Generally speaking, the publisher will plan a specific number of novels in a given Shared World. They will have general, or very specific, areas they will want those novels to cover. They will then approach a writer with a proposal for what they want written and a contract for the book or books. Star Wars is infamous for having a very long and detailed contract for authors of any sort (including short fiction) and two of the authors on the panel have written for Star Wars in the past. They both indicated that it was far more hassle than it was worth.

The Outline, Submission, and Business Part:

Here are some general guidelines for outlines --

- *Write in present tense
- *Your synopsis should have a beginning, middle, and end in that order
- *Check the latest Writers Market at your local library for current information on publishing houses
- *Include your character treatments
- *Remember, your outline is your sales pitch
- *Your proposal should be only two or three sentences long and should open your letter followed by your plot synopsis then your outline and treatments
- *Try to get the name of an editor at a house and send directly to them if possible to keep things from the slush pile
- *When you are a new or untried author having extra detail in your character treatments is actually helpful.

Things you should know about the business --

- *Read your contract even if it is 40 pages long (Star Wars)
- *Know what the kill fees are
- *Know what the upfront payout is
- *Know your per book sales amounts and what is average for the industry
- *Know your close fee

How to Get a Leg Up --

- *Go to conventions!
- *Cruise the dealer room for guidelines, publishers, editors, business cards, and to see what is hot and selling
- *Know your market
- *Volunteer at cons so you can get "face time" with authors, editors, and others.
- *Keep up to date on the latest in gaming and television so you are prepared
- *Attend workshops and panels so people recognize you

Continuity and Canon:

When you work in a Shared World, you need to know about your world but the bottom line is what is in the contract. It doesn't matter if your work is canon compliant if internal continuity or the specifics of the contract are not met. Often, a company will want you to create new canon or will want to deviate from known continuity for some reason. If that is part of your contract then you must be flexible enough to deliver what the company requests.

Editors will sometimes give you information but, frequently, your editor is not a continuity person for the franchise. Be sure to do your own legwork or to ask if something will fit from someone at the house who is designated for continuity if you have questions. If such a person does not exist then be prepared to do your own work and reading to ensure things are right.

Sometimes, other work in the hopper will clash against yours. A new game version may be on the horizon and the rules or magic or something will conflict with what you are doing. Several authors lamented when other novels or game guides came out and had one or two little toss off things which totally screwed up their plot and required complete rewrites.