Note that Shataina’s Story, the website, has MOVED. I no longer own shataina.com. You can find my thesis fiction draft at:

http://pandora.simons-rock.edu/~shataina/

... and now onward to the thesis introduction PDF!
Shataina's Story,

or,

The Infamous Fanfiction Thesis

by
Lydia Laurenson (KSC)

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Bachelor of Arts

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(also known as: Yes, I Really Do Need To Thank This Many People)

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Prologue: A Thesis is Born

I've been interested in fantasy my whole life. When I was younger I — of course — played make-believe, imagining worlds of swords and magic and demigods. I read fantasy books religiously as I grew older, and it didn't take long, after the advent of computers, for me to discover online text-based fantasy roleplaying games. A roleplaying game, as excellently defined by Stephen L. Lortz, is "any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment" (quoted, Fine 6). Quite simply, it's a game deliberately set up so that the players can pretend to be a character in another world. It is, essentially, a structured and sophisticated form of make-believe.

The character I pretended to be, from the first, was named Shataina; and at first, I must admit, I didn't really understand the way roleplaying games were supposed to work. That is, I understood that within the context of the game, I could shoot fireballs and kill monsters and do other things I couldn't do in our world, and of course I understood that I could only do those things in the gameworld, not in our world. But I didn't understand that I was supposed to be playing a role — pretending to be someone else. I truly thought of Shataina as myself. I didn't separate her from myself as a "character" I had made up: I just used her as an avatar for me, in the gameworld.

It took a while — years — for me to understand fully that other people who played the game thought of their characters as just that — a separate character, someone as wholly different from themselves as an author's main character is from the author. In fact, I realized, this was expected and desired, and people like me, who just acted like themselves, were often viewed as unbalanced or, at the best, "bad roleplayers" (a terrible insult!). Thus, around the time when I entered high school, I began to think of Shataina as someone else: like me, but not me anymore.

When I came to college, I started playing a new kind of roleplaying game: tabletop roleplaying games, which don't use computers at all, but are instead regulated by a person that the players of the game agree to have as a "referee." I was also introduced to a variety of new possible gameworlds. I played games in which all the characters were fantasy archetypes such as wizards, warriors, elves, and dwarves; I also played games in which the characters were vampires, or shapechanging creatures, or fairies. For every new game I tried, I re-created Shataina, making a new "version" of her for each new setting — for example, for a setting that's all about vampires, I made a version of Shataina who's a vampire. And the more I played Shataina while conscious of the fact that she was supposed to be separate from me, the more separate she became from me — and yet, the more developed she became as a character in her own right.

This process, this separation, which had begun while I was still playing Shataina in computer games, accelerated itself when I began to play her in tabletop roleplaying games. It is a difficult process to describe. The best way to put it is that I stopped thinking of Shataina in the first person, and began thinking about her in the third person. When I considered her actions, I no longer thought, "I did this" — I thought, "Shataina did this."

I had identified, originally, very closely with her — as I said, I originally never even thought of her as a character separate from myself. This had its down sides: the bad things that happened to her would distress me; insults to her would wound me. But the up side was that I had a way to fulfill dreams and fantasies that were impossible to fulfill in the real world. As long as I believed in her as myself, she was a kind of permanent catharsis — only better than catharsis, because it wasn't just someone I could relate to, it was me who was learning the lessons and feeling the emotions. Things that happened to her felt as if they were things that had
happened to me. But as she separated from me and I began to think of her actions as hers and not mine, I lost that feeling. And although it took me a while to understand why playing Shataina wasn't as satisfying, I eventually understood just what I had lost, and it hurt. I would rather believe in her, and feel as if I am her, I thought, even if this means I want to cry when she's unhappy, even if people tell me I'm crazy. It would be better for me to feel as if she's real than for me to feel as if I've lost a piece of my heart.

Why did I feel that way? It's hard to say. It seems to go against what people want, in general; why would anyone elect to feel pain? Perhaps it has something to do with the concept of catharsis. Or perhaps it's simply that feeling the experiences of Shataina satisfies something elusive in me — a desire for heroism, or for my actions to have a real effect on the world, or for myself to be someone that I, quite simply, like better than I like myself.

In my junior year, I created the character of Shataina once again for a new tabletop game — "Exalted", a game produced by White Wolf Game Studio. The setting is a peculiar sort of mix of traditions from many places, including amazingly diverse influences from J.R.R. Tolkien to Asian mythology. I created Shataina as a character within the "Exalted" setting, and my friend Dustin regulated a game in which I was the only player. The game lasted intensively for the entire Fall semester, and continues sporadically to this day. The most impressive thing about it, though, is that over the course of it, because it was such an intense experience, I managed to recapture a lot of what I had thought was lost forever about how I relate to Shataina. That is, I managed to become incredibly involved in being her — so much so that I would even cry or get depressed for weeks when she suffered a major setback, and often had more trouble relating to events in our own world than I did to events in the fictional world Shataina exists in. Although it was sometimes inconvenient and distressing, I was glad to have so much of her back. I felt as if I'd regained a huge and important part of myself — although of course it wasn't complete, because I don't think of her as now as essentially identical to myself; but she's very, very close.

I have always had a tendency to "chronicle" my own life in my mind; as I run errands, or sit in class, or do other things, I'll sometimes find myself thinking about how I would depict that very moment if I were writing it as a book, imagining my thoughts and feelings as written descriptions. Towards the end of the Fall semester, I found myself doing this with Shataina's game more and more; I'd consider past events in the game at length, imagining how to write them, setting them out in words in my head. Finally, I thought, Why not write it as a novel? At the very least, it's a good story.

That very Intersession, I began to write.

It was my junior year, so I was also thinking about what subject to write my thesis on. I'd come up with several ideas, all unsatisfactory and uninspiring. At last, it occurred to me that perhaps I could try to forge Shataina's story into a thesis. Doing so, I knew, would allow me to do a largely written thesis (one of my goals), as well as giving me a chance not only to focus on Shataina's story, but also to extensively analyze how it affected me and how the game, as a game, translates into a novel.

And so — my thesis was born: a chance not only for me to start retelling Shataina's story — a project that I view somewhat similarly to the way I imagine many people view writing their memoirs — but also, a structured way for me to forge my experiences with fantasy novels and games into a unified set of ideas.

In constructing this thesis, then, I have encompassed several things. First comes the Introduction, which I have divided into several parts. In the first part, to help set the stage, I provide a basic explanation or definition of the fantasy genre. I've also written as brief an explanation as possible of tabletop roleplaying games, and provided an example. The latter is meant for those who have never played tabletop roleplaying games; I hope that it will help them understand what I'm talking about when I discuss the difficulties of translating the played game into the written novel. In the second part, I discuss why I believe fantasy is read and written (and played in the form of games), as well as what the difference is between the way we experience the read / written form and the game form. Finally, I describe the process of the game and the novel that has come from it: the way the game affected me personally, and the difficulties of transforming the game I played into the written story. While working on the thesis, I distributed a fantasy survey (see Appendix II), and my findings will be cited throughout this Introduction.
After the Introduction comes the story itself: the first Book of Shataina's Story, the novel. Interspersed throughout the pages of Shataina's Story are pages of calligraphy with painted borders. This is yet another part of the thesis — an artistic part, required of me in order to express my artistic training here at Simon's Rock. For this, I have experimented with the idea of expressing character through a calligraphic "font" — an attempt to "illustrate," if you will, a character using a font rather than an actual illustration. To this end I have developed fonts for five major characters (Shataina, Arlan, Jikor, Sara, and Lin); each character speaks in his or her font. Everything besides dialogue is written in a sixth, "neutral" font — the "narrator" font.

I developed the fonts themselves using general aesthetic judgment, coupled with some research into the field of graphoanalysis (handwriting analysis). This process of font-development is further detailed in Appendix I. Mostly, the point of this artistic side to my thesis is to find a new way to express the characters, but I have found that it helped me in writing as well. Developing the fonts required me to think long and hard about individual personality characteristics for each of the five characters I created them for, and in some ways this helped me figure out a little bit more about how to "sum them up." Painting the borders was also unexpectedly helpful, because it required me to imagine — to actively picture in my head — certain scenes that I had not previously considered so assiduously, and thereby helped me understand how better to describe them through writing. The entire artistic angle, overall, helped me realize that I need to actively consider the actual scenes that I write more than I do now; thinking of them in terms of illustration has shown me how incomplete my descriptions really are, and will, I hope, improve my fictional descriptive abilities in the future.

So — here comes the thesis. Look out.

Introduction

Part I. What is Fantasy, and Why Do We Value It?

The task of defining fantasy is a tricky one. There have been long and wordy books written on the subject, entire conferences held on it. Everyone seems to have an idea, and any book that so much as discusses the fantasy genre must generally spend at least a chapter defining it at the beginning.

Some authors use rather quirky definitions, such as Tzvetan Todorov, a noted fantasy theorist, who defines fantasy as something that straddles the line between belief and disbelief. As he puts it, "I nearly reached the point of believing: that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life" (31). He also states that in order to be fantastic, a story may be neither poetic nor allegorical (32). Personally, I dismiss the second half of his definition out of hand. There have been plenty of examples of fantasy poetry, such as, for example, much of Neil Gaiman's work; and allegory is, I believe, just as acceptable in the fantasy genre as it is in any other genre. (Some, such as J.R.R. Tolkien, dismiss pure allegory as fantasy because it lacks "enchantment," but I think that this generates the same problem as definitions that require fantasy to have a sense of "wonder," which I discuss below.) There have been lots of allegorical romances and mysteries; why not fantasies? As for the first half, I don't think that the reader's belief or disbelief in the events of a story will change its genre. If this were true, then genre would have to change by reader; not, perhaps, an unacceptable idea in general, but one that makes discourse on specific genres a lot more difficult. So, for the sake of ease of discussion, I generally set Todorov's intriguing definition aside.

Other authors, such as C.N. Manlove, define fantasy at least partly by the feelings or emotions it invokes; the first half of Manlove's definition states that fantasy is a "fiction evoking wonder" (1). This appears to be a common idea, but I generally leave it for the same reason that I disregard the first half of Todorov's definition: whether or not fantasy evokes wonder for some people, there may always be at least one person for whom it does not evoke wonder. As Todorov points out when he himself is discussing definitions, if we determine fantasy by emotion, "we should have to conclude that a work's genre depends on the sang-froid of its
reader" (35). Although it is not inconceivable that the genre of a book might change according to the reader, I think that in order to facilitate actual discussion of different genres, it is better to find an objective definition that does not involve sang-froid at all. As well, it's worth noting that other genres can very easily evoke wonder; defining fantasy as the one that does it seems odd to me, as I myself have experienced wonder at books that certainly fall into genres besides fantasy, and know others who have as well.

Most definitions include the words "supernatural," "impossible," or both. It is worth noting that one-fifth of the respondents to my fantasy survey explicitly used the words "impossible" or "not real" in their own definitions, and many more implied them. Both "supernatural" and "impossible" are difficult terms to define, however; what is "supernatural" may change according to which culture or era one is in, and many things have been thought to be "impossible" that turned out to be quite, quite possible — leading to such statements as "anything's possible."

In general, I have found that the best definition of "impossible" for the purpose of a definition of the fantasy genre comes from Brian Attebery, who says that fantasy involves "the deliberate violation of consensus reality" (2). However, then we come up against another wall: all fantasy does not necessarily contain the impossible; there is some fantasy that merely implies the impossible. For example, the fantasy author Tanith Lee has written a series of novels called the Blood Opera Sequence, the first two novels of which involve an extremely long-lived family who happen to abhor the sun and happen to enjoy drinking blood. In our consensus reality, we would call actual vampires impossible — but actual vampires never crop up anywhere in these two books; instead we are merely confronted with a family of extraordinary longevity and questionable taste. The two novels are unquestionably fantasy, however. Everyone who reads them or attempts to categorize them calls them "fantasy," including the author herself. These and other examples lead me to take a cue from E.M. Forster (who states that fantasy "implies the supernatural, but need not express it" [78]) and define fantasy, for myself, as a genre of books that imply the impossible, but need not express it.

It is important to append the end-note that fantasy as a genre is a very broad category, and that there is a subcategory known as "high fantasy" or "genre fantasy." High fantasy is perhaps best articulated as "everything J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings is." Ursula K. Le Guin presents a helpful and mostly accurate list of fantasy conventions that includes (among other things): magic; magicians; a fundamental hierarchy of power, which she defines as being "often based on an idealized model of medieval European feudalism"; a quest; mythical peoples, such as dwarves; mythical animals; shape-changing; and spells, chiefly involving language and the manipulation of language (4 - 5). These genre conventions are incredibly common and difficult to avoid, although not all high fantasy includes all of them. Indeed, many of the definitions I got for my fantasy survey didn't bother avoiding genre conventions at all; one respondent said, for example, that "fantasy often refers to a tolien esq [sic] setting, often including dragons and chicks in chainmail," and another defined fantasy as "Anything I can call not reality, but has a tiny tinge of pre-industrial era life" (the pre-industrial era being yet another strong high-fantasy genre convention). However, defining fantasy by the genre conventions of high fantasy is just as faulty as defining, say, mysteries by film noir genre conventions, which is why I stick to the general fantasy definition that I offered above.

The question of why fantasy exists has preoccupied many an author, and a great deal of ink has been expended in its study. J.R.R. Tolkien himself, whom many call the father of modern fantasy, wrote an essay called "On Fairy-Stories," in which he discussed its nature and significance. He contends, in this work, that fantasy has three important qualities: Recovery, Escape, and Consolation.

Recovery is fantasy's ability to bring us to a heightened appreciation of the "real world." When we imagine fantastic things, he argues, it helps us come back to the realization of how fantastic and wondrous our own world truly is. "We should meet the centaur and the dragon," he says, "and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses — and wolves .... Recovery ... is a re-gaining — regaining of a clear view" (77). And Tolkien maintains that there is nothing at all wrong with this: "[the critics who call fantasy "escapist"] are confusing ... the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter," he notes (79), explaining that the escape offered by fantasy is a way to get away from the ugly and awful things
about this world for a time, not a way to run away from this world altogether: "Fairy-stories may invent
monsters that fly in the air or dwell in the deep, but at least they do not try to escape from heaven or the sea." 

Those who attempt to force us to focus on the here and now, those who concentrate always on unremittingly
practical things, are, he asserts, losing sight of "heaven and the sea" — of all the natural and beautiful things in
our world that inspire imagination — and can see only, say, such practical things as the roof of a railway-
station or the dinginess of a city-river.

The third fantasy characteristic, Consolation, is possibly the most interesting. Tolkien claims that
Consolation is the most important part of a fantasy story, and goes on to say that the most important aspect
of Consolation itself is that a fantasy story must always end well. Consolation is partially the "satisfaction
of ancient desires" such as the wish to talk to animals, he says, or the wish to escape from death; but, he states,
"far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all
complete fairy-stories must have it" (85).

I think that Tolkien really did grasp two extremely important things about fantasy with Recovery and
Escape. Recovery is an important aspect of fantasy, although definitely the one that is most often lost sight of;
many people simply lose themselves in fantasy and never bother to appreciate the "real world." But I don't
think that anyone will argue that Recovery, though sometimes brushed aside, is always a possibility; and I
think that not only does it function for those who read and write fantasy, but also for those who play fantasy
roleplaying games.

Escape is a more generally accepted aspect of fantasy, and I think that a lot of people think that
roleplaying games especially lend themselves to escapism. Almost a third of my survey respondents explicitly
used the word "escape" or "escapism" in their discussions of why they play roleplaying games, and more
implied the word or hinted at it. I don't think, again, that anyone will argue that escape is an important and
major function of fantasy; I don't think it's the only one, though, as some people seem to believe. I favour
Tolkien's interpretation of it; I think that no one can be criticized for seeking an escape from the worst parts of
the "real world" — as long as they aren't deserting the real world, as Tolkien noted, but will come back to it
eventually and see to their responsibilities, especially if there's even a chance that they'll then see more clearly
how wondrous the "real" world is.

As for Consolation — I think that requiring a happy ending from fantasy is too limiting: why put that
kind of restriction on an entire genre? I believe that this is something about which Tolkien is partially
mistaken. But there is more to Consolation than just the "happy ending" that he thought was necessary; and I
will return to it later.

There are, of course, other views on the subject of fantasy and its function besides Tolkien's. Many
authors, for example, contend that fantasy is used mainly to make value statements or prove points — that its
entire purpose is to be a comment on the so-called "real" world. There has been fantasy written for this
purpose. For example, C.S. Lewis and William Goldman have both written works that do so, such books as
Perelandra (Lewis) and The Princess Bride (Goldman) being shining examples. But I think that many people
who write fantasy, and most people who play fantasy roleplaying games, aren't doing it with didactic intent.

In terms of fantasy roleplaying games, the action of playing such a game isn't like making a considered
social comment; for one thing, because there are at least two people involved (the storyteller or "referee" plus at
least one player), there isn't a single person applying his or her morals and ideals to create a specifically
oriented product. As one of my survey respondents said, "The plotlines produced by games tend to be much
less structured, due to the fact that they are generally not born of a unified artistic vision. ... I personally draw
little distinction between role-playing and improvisational theatre ...." When more than one person is improvising
the actions of the story, there's no way to assert a single moral perspective throughout the tale. In addition,
because dice so often control what actually happens, the players in the game can't be sure that the actions and
successes of the characters in the story will reinforce their own ideals. Thus, while some fantasy novels may be
written with didactic intentions (and while it is clear that there are many that are not written specifically to prove
ideological points), we may be reasonably certain that most fantasy games are not played for didactic purposes;
the purpose of fantasy in games must therefore be something else.

A return to why fantasy is written may help discern what this "something else" is. Another reason that many authors have given for the reading and writing of fantasy is the satisfaction of a deep longing within us, which can only be satisfied by fantasy. Various authors have discussed this longing, and its expression in fantasy novels, in different ways; most of them, interestingly, dismiss heroism as being what we look for from fantasy books. Heroism, after all, argues Keith Battarbee, can be found in many figures that aren't fantastic, such as James Bond and MacGyver; so fantasy must satisfy a desire for something beyond heroism in order to be so popular. What he believes it offers is, in his own words, a "yearning for dignity." Fantasy, he says, "validate[s] a hierarchical and heroic worldview in which dignity of behaviour is the cultural norm" (192) — a feeling of self-worth, a tendency to take oneself seriously. So, while heroism feeds into what Battarbee thinks a fantasy reader wants, it is the feeling of dignity that he thinks we're really after; those of us who read fantasy want to believe in a kind of intrinsic nobility for all people, including ourselves, and reading and writing fantasy helps validate us, giving us that nobility of spirit and helping us to believe in it.

This may be true for some fantasy, but I believe that something more is sought by fantasy readers than just a sense of and belief in dignity. When I did a research paper on the definition and ideals of fantasy last year, I think that I came close to figuring out what it is. At that time, I wrote the following:

But I believe that I have found the most important ideal of fantasy ... it was already something, I think, that I half-understood but could not put into words. This ideal is overwhelmingly well-represented in my research. At least half of the authors I read agreed on this point, either explicitly or implicitly: that fantasy is an expression of longing and desire, always unsatisfied, always sought ....

C. S. Lewis defines what I have labeled the "unsatisfied longing" very well, as the concept he refers to as Joy: "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction" (27). Verlyn Flieger has done me the service of describing how this desire functions far better than I ever could as she writes about Tolkien, saying that "[Tolkien] was an exile speaking to exiles, [to those]... who felt a longing to which he gave a voice, a longing for Faërie, for the Fortunate Isles, for those shores a good deal further off that ceaselessly beckon the voyager" (258).

This quotation also reflects the way that, peculiarly, the unsatisfied longing is satisfied. While we are reading fantasy, we are in a world where our longings are there, created, existent. But then when we put the book down, the longing is back, as strong or stronger than before.

(Laurenson, 9)

This concept of unsatisfied longing resonates with me deeply. I have perhaps reshaped it a little bit into my own idea of why fantasy is written. I think that fantasy helps give shape to dreams that are perhaps best left in the realm of the ideal and the intangible; it helps to develop them more, that we may dream them more fully. When we put down the book, the longing, though further formed and fulfilled, is as sharp as before, but we revel in it. It's a good sort of longing, a longing that we want to experience.

And now I return to Tolkien's Consolation. Tolkien, as I noted earlier, said that a happy ending is necessary for a fantasy to be truly good — because "In such stories when the sudden 'turn' [towards the happy ending] comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, renders indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through" (87). Tolkien has put it best — but perhaps he isn't really speaking of the happy ending here, at least not as traditionally conceived. No, I suspect that Tolkien, brilliant though he was, confused the form of the ultimate goal of fantasy for everyone with the form that it took for him. I am speaking once again about the unsatisfied longing. The glory in the happy ending of which Tolkien speaks is not, I think, the glory of a happy ending per se; it is the fact that it helps us gain "a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire" — the desire that is always desired, and never reached, which gleams through, for Tolkien, in a perfectly done happy ending. In other words, the unsatisfied longing, the glimpse of the heart's desire, invariably took the form of the happy ending for Tolkien, but it doesn't always take that form for everyone. And so I suspect that even Tolkien, although he didn't put it in such a way, might
have sought the same thing as the rest of us — the beautiful, unsatisfied, unsatisfiable longing from fantasy. His unsatisfied longing may have merely taken on a more specific form than most.

The question that comes now is: can this, the unsatisfied longing that fantasy gives expression to, be applied to roleplaying games? Do people play roleplaying games for the same reason that they read fantasy books — to help sharpen and appreciate that unsatisfied, desirable desire?

To answer this question, first I think it is helpful to think about what the differences are between the experience of playing a fantasy roleplaying game and the experience of reading or writing a fantasy novel; I partially did this already, earlier, when I discussed why fantasy roleplaying games are not workable as a considered social comment the way some fantasy novels are. As I said then, roleplaying games are, for one thing, the result of several combined artistic visions rather than one single artistic vision — the author of a book is not answerable to anyone about her book's content, while the players or referee of a game are answerable to each other and must work with each others' ideas for the game to function, thus making it a collaborative endeavour.

There are other differences between writing and playing, however, which I did not discuss earlier. One of these is the participatory nature of the experience of the participants in roleplaying games as opposed to the passive nature of the experience of the reader of a novel. (Unsurprisingly, just about everyone who answered my survey noted this difference; it is impossible to miss, being a fundamental quality of the two opposed experiences.) The referee in a roleplaying game decides what happens, sometimes based on the outcome of the dice and sometimes not. The players get to decide the actions and choices of their own characters, although whether they actually succeed at an attempted action is once again up to the dice. As one respondent to my survey commented, a roleplaying game "is closer to real life because there is no re-do and once a second has passed there is no doing it again." In contrast, reading a novel is a relatively passive experience; although it is not quite as passive as, say, television, it is quite passive when compared to an imaginary environment that one can actually interact with and affect, like that of a roleplaying game. Also, writing a novel gives the author far greater control over the events of the story than any of the participants in a roleplaying game will ever have. The author may consider at length the actions of his or her characters, rather than having to make an on-the-spot decision or depend upon a roll of the dice. The success or failure of anything that takes place in the story, the actions of all characters, the "rules" the world within the novel works by and the events within that world — all of these are completely up to the author, and he or she has complete control over them. (Although authors often testify to the surprises that occur in the writing process, having a character over which an author has control "surprise" him or her is quite different from being forced to follow the rules of a world he or she did not invent — or from being forced to take a roll of the dice to determine the outcome of a character's actions, without consideration or contest.)

It's also worth noting that playing in a roleplaying game is a fundamentally ephemeral experience, unlike reading or writing a book. One respondent mentioned how "the novel exists at all times and I can read it again when I want. [A roleplaying game] ... exists only in the minds of its troupe and only at the moment it is being played. [Participating in a roleplaying game] is like seeing or hearing a live performance by a talented actor or singer — the moment and the words will not exist again." In other words, all that's left after a roleplaying game has been played is the memory of the participatory experience, while the reader or writer of a book may, at any time, go back over what has been written and experience it again (barring accident or destruction of the material, of course). I think that this is why I regard the writing of Shataina's story as more like writing a memoir than the crafting of a fictional story — because the events happened, in a sense; I was, in a sense, there — and all that's left now is a memory, just as if I had actually lived through the events.

Taking all this into account, I decided to examine, after my research on what authors think the purpose of fantasy is, what gamers think the purpose of fantasy is. This was what much of my fantasy survey focused on.

The majority of responses had to do with a simple desire for heroism, and beyond that, a desire to feel as if one's life matters — as if it affects the world one lives in. When I asked why respondents played roleplaying
games and enjoyed fantasy novels, I was often given such answers as:

"[Playing roleplaying games] allows me to enact things that appeal on a more epic level than the day-to-day living of being a student. In the fantasy world, your actions have a far greater impact and events seem crucial to the world."

"I like a place where there is a sense of meaning .... I like being more significant to world events or reading about someone who is."

But I think that although people want heroism, the unsatisfied longing is a huge part of what they seek as well — even though they may think of it in a different way. Many of my respondents' answers reflected an extraordinarily deep desire for magic — often attached to a claim that more is possible in a world with magic, and that this is why they enjoy roleplaying in or reading about such worlds: "the unlimited potential available in fantasy [is why I like it]," said one, while another explained that "the way you can take the fantasy genre and do whatever you please with it, and use whatever you want, is very liberating." Most plaintive of all was the answer that read: "I want fantasy to be real. I want the possibility to exist. I want magic."

I am especially intrigued by such answers as these, mostly because many roleplaying games, by their very nature, are regulated by rules — restrictions are placed on the world that they are set in. Thus, not everything is possible, and the players can't necessarily do whatever they want. For instance, in "Exalted," there are a great many things that can't be done; the most obvious example is that the rule system explicitly states that no force in Heaven or Creation — none of the gods in the gameworld, none of the magic in the gameworld, nothing — can bring a dead person back to life. (It can create a simulacrum of the dead person, or a convincing illusion, or something, but it can't resurrect him or her.) One would think that if these game-players really wanted to be able to do anything, they wouldn't play in roleplaying games that have such rules and such specific limitations. And yet they do play them, which implies that there is more to why they play than "infinite possibility" or "infinite freedom."

Thus I find myself returning to the question of unsatisfied longing. I suspect that the reason why these respondents replied that they want magic so desperately is, in fact, that magic must be an unsatisfied longing — it can't avoid being unsatisfied, because it doesn't exist in our world (at least, not to my relatively certain knowledge). So these people who replied that they wanted magic might be at least partially desirous of magic because they're looking for something they can't have — they seek, as Verlyn Flieger said, "those shores a good deal further off that ceaselessly beckon the voyager." Magic, and increased possibility, is a convenient name for what they're looking for, because they know they want something that isn't here. Thus, they may unconsciously think, they must want something that is elsewhere — and in worlds with magic or more infinite possibility than our own, there are certainly things that aren't here and never can be. So they believe that what they're looking for is that. In the same way that J.R.R. Tolkien thought that what he really wanted from fantasy was, of necessity, a happy ending, when what he actually wanted from fantasy was the "piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire," which doesn't necessarily have to come with a happy ending, perhaps these respondents only think that they want magic.

One participant in the survey observed, "Maybe [the appeal of fantasy is] something like religion — a desperate need to believe that there is something more than just mundane reality." "Something more" is the phrase that jumps out at me from that statement — yes, we always want something more. If our mundane reality contained magic and truly infinite possibilities for us to take advantage of, would we still want something more?

And yet this theory I have come up with — the idea that unsatisfied, unsatisfiable longing is all there is to the desire for fantasy — doesn't seem exactly right to me. This is because, quite simply, although I do feel a longing for fantasy, I also feel an unmistakable satisfaction when I play fantasy games or read fantasy, especially if I'm playing the character of Shataina in a game that feels especially real. I think that although this longing can never really be satisfied, there truly is a certain satisfaction in touching a kind of fantastical reality for a moment — grasping it, feeling it to the utmost, and then letting it go. Perhaps Tolkien would have said that we get more than just a glimpse of purest joy; we truly feel it — for the briefest of moments — and that moment of purest joy is incredibly satisfying.
Part II. What is a Roleplaying Game?

Shataina's Story is set in the world of the roleplaying game "Exalted," which is (especially when my friends and I are playing it) a very high-fantasy world. It's pre-industrial (but has its own kind of "magical technology"), full of strange and magical beings, does indeed involve a "fundamental hierarchy of power," and so on. I've deliberately written Shataina's Story in such a way that people who are completely unfamiliar with the game, the game's rules, and so on will still be able to understand what's going on; but for the purposes of this Introduction, I think it's necessary that my reader understand exactly what a roleplaying game like "Exalted" is, and how it works.

Roleplaying games involve, essentially, at least four different sources of input. Firstly, there is a published setting that includes rules for the game; these are put out by the company that makes it (in this case, White Wolf Game Studio). The setting and rules are colloquially known as "canon": when individuals play the game, they often make up their own new rules and new setting information, which may even directly contradict the "canon" version of the way things are supposed to be. That's just the way the game works, and companies that make games are well aware that it happens. The second source is the referee (the official White Wolf term for the referee is "Storyteller"). (For the game involving Shataina, my friend Dustin was the Storyteller.) He comes up with situations in which to put your character, describes the gameworld, and decides what happens based on the outcomes of various die rolls. The third source is the player(s) of the game — in this case, I was the only player. The player makes a character according to the rules of the game — basically, a character that fits in within the setting. The fourth source of input is the dice, which determine the outcome of certain actions taken by the player.

To create a character, the player of a game is given a number of points to spend, which may be assigned to various "statistics" that represent what a given character is good at. Obviously, if a character spends more points on a certain statistic, she'll be better at it, but she will then have fewer points to put into other statistics. Statistics in Exalted are rated from 1 to 5: 1 = poor / novice level of skill; 2 = average / low-end professional level of skill; 3 = above average / elite skill; 4 = truly extraordinary talent; and 5 = the pinnacle of human potential. There is one statistic that comes on a 1 - 10 scale — Willpower, which measures the strength of the character's will. After a character is made, while the game is being played, these statistics will go up slowly as the character gets better at using her skills.

In "Exalted," characters such as Shataina generally have really good statistics even from the beginning; they are chosen by the gods because of their skill and fate'd greatness, and the gods make sure that their servants are extra-good at things. Then characters also have "Charms", which represent their magical abilities. Charms can do basically anything, but they are more or less powerful, and have different kinds of potential, based on what kind of magical creature a given character is. Shataina was chosen by the Unconquered Sun, who is the most powerful god in the "Exalted" gameworld, so she is a Solar Exalt, and her Charms are quite powerful, even when she's young and untrained (and as she gets older and more experienced, her Charms only become more powerful). However, the Dragon-Blooded, who are chosen by the slightly weaker gods of the elements, have control over a lot of elemental effects, and can use weaker Charms; the raw power of their magic is nothing compared to hers, but sometimes they can do things she just can't. There are reasons within the gameworld why certain people are chosen by the gods of the gameworld and others aren't; but the "real" reason they are chosen, in out-of-game terms, is "because we want to play characters who are magical beings and not mere mortals." In other words, although there are very complex fictional reasons about the motivations of a god for choosing a given character, what those reasons boil down to for those who play the game is: "because we wanted a given character to be chosen."

I know that this all sounds incredibly complicated, but I'm hoping that it will become clearer with the following examples.

Creating the character of Shataina in terms of assigning points was a very long and complicated process. One thing I did, for example, was deciding what her "Attributes" were at the start of the game.
"Attributes" are character statistics that represent how good a character is at a general, overall category of action. They come in three categories: Physical, Social and Mental. Because Shataina is generally best at social tasks, she had 8 points to distribute among her Social Attributes: Charisma, Manipulation and Appearance. Each Attribute starts with one point in it already. I chose to distribute these points by putting four points into Appearance (this, added to the one point that was already there, gave Shataina 5 in her Appearance Attribute, thereby putting her at the maximum of human potential in beauty — in other words, she's the most beautiful that any mortal human can ever possibly be). Then I put two points into Charisma and two into Manipulation, so that she has 3 in both; this means that she's both quite charismatic, and quite good at getting people to do what she wants them to do. Over the course of the game, Shataina became even more charismatic and even better at getting people to do what she wants them to do, and therefore, since then, both her Charisma and her Manipulation Attributes have gone up. However, she has not, for example, gone above the limit of human potential to become even more beautiful, so her Appearance Attribute has stayed the same. (The way that Dustin and I played the game used a system that largely involved dealing with raises in statistics by, well, playing it by ear; essentially, when Dustin thought that Shataina had used a given skill or learned enough about how to do a certain thing to justify going up by a point — for example, if he thought that Shataina had been manipulative enough, and had learned enough about manipulating other people, for her Manipulation to go up by one point — then he would tell me that her Manipulation had gone up by one point. This is not in line with the rules of the published game — normally, statistics go up in a different fashion, one that involves substantially more number-crunching; but Dustin and I prefer to have him use the common-sense approach that I have outlined.)

The entire process of creating a character goes along similar lines: there are lots of categories of statistics, and the player who is creating the character puts points into these statistics, which determine exactly how good the character is going to be at certain things.

The way that these statistics are used involves dice, and rules that are set out by the game's rulebooks. Different roleplaying games utilize different kinds of dice, but "Exalted" uses only ten-sided dice. The number of dice someone has for a given action are dependent on how many points that character has in the relevant statistic. So, for example, if Shataina attempts to persuade someone to do something for her, then she adds her Manipulation Attribute to her Presence Ability (Presence measures how well someone can project their force of personality). Shataina has 3 Manipulation and 5 Presence, and she's especially persuasive, so she gets 2 extra dice when she is specifically attempting to persuade someone to do something with gentle words (as opposed to threatening them, for example). This means that she rolls a total of 10 dice to persuade someone to do something for her. If a given die comes up 7 or above, then it's called "one success", and if it's a 10, then it's "two successes". Whether one succeeds at a given action depends on the number of successes one gets on the dice. So, for example, if Shataina's 10 ten-sided dice come up 1, 7, 8, 9, 5, 10, 4, 2, 9, 3, then she has scored six successes (a 7, an 8, two 9s and a 10 which, as previously noted, counts as two). This is extremely good and means that she almost certainly persuaded her target to do what she wants.

I should note that it's really not necessary for the reader to understand exactly how the dice work. The reader doesn't need to know exactly how many successes are necessary to do something, or what Shataina's specific statistics are, or anything like that. It's just important that the reader keep in mind that if Shataina attempts to do something, then I will roll dice to see if she succeeds. She may be more likely to succeed at what she's attempting if she has a higher score in the relevant statistic (and therefore more dice), and she may be less likely to succeed if she isn't good at it, but the dice are tricky and fickle and untrustworthy ... so, sometimes, Shataina succeeds or fails at certain actions unexpectedly.

I'm going to give an example of gameplay here, which will, I hope, make how this works reasonably clear. As my example, I am going to use a part of the game that I have not yet written into Shataina's Story; it takes place after the end of the segment of Shataina's Story that I have presented as my thesis, and so it is not in the creative writing that I have given.

The backstory up until this point is this: Shataina has run away from home and is in hiding from her former family and countrymen, who think that she's a special kind of demon known as Anathema. She has
been away, living as a travelling storyteller and revolutionary, for over a year, and has recently spotted her ex-lover, Arlan, in the street; she has no idea what that portends. Two of her friends, Kulo and Tara, have been taken by her enemies, and she's noticed a cloaked figure following her about, but has never been able to catch her. My friend Vinny is sitting in on the game session, observing how it goes.

At the beginning of the game session, after we've all sat down and gotten out our dice and whatnot, Dustin begins the scene by telling me the first few events. He explains that Shataina receives a message on the wind — a message that sounds as if someone is whispering in her ear. It says, "If you ever want to see your friends alive again, come to the Manse at the edge of town." So, as Shataina's player, I get to decide what she does; so Shataina, naturally, picks up her sword and goes to the Manse. She has a tiny amount of poison left over from a previous event, and I decide that she coats one edge of her blade with it, fearing that she may be facing someone who won't be using honourable tactics, and that she may need to have such a trick up her sleeve.

Shataina arrives at the Manse, and walks up the silent, unguarded path into the Manse itself...

_The actual game session, between Dustin and me, looked roughly like this:_

    Dustin: Okay, Lydia. You walk through the unguarded doors of the Manse and find yourself in an enormous room — the main centre room of the Manse. There's a fountain in the centre and tall balconies all around the room, facing inward, sort of like an arena, only a house. Under the balconies are a few closed doors, and you can see some doors leading off the balconies, too. There's no one on the balconies, though. In fact there's no one here at all, except for Kulo and Tara. There's a big standing pole, sort of like a thin telephone pole, in the middle of the room, and Kulo and Tara are tied together at the top of it — bound back to back. What do you do?
    
    Lydia: I walk forward. My sword is out, by the way.
    Dustin: I know. As you're walking forward, the cloaked figure comes out from a darkened corner of the room and steps in front of the pole.
    Lydia: I stop. Have I mentioned that I have my sword out?
    Dustin: Yes. The cloaked figure turns slowly to face you, then pulls down her hood. You can see her face; it's Mnemon Sara [an old enemy and rival for Arlan].
    Lydia: Oh no. I say, "Mnemon Sara," making my voice cool and remote.
    Dustin: She says, "Shataina."
    Lydia: "What is the purpose of this?"
    Dustin: "We have unfinished business."
    Lydia: "I could kill you where you stand."
    Dustin: "But your friends would die."
    Lydia: "By whose hand?"
    Dustin: "This is my home. If I chose to, I could bring guards to support me. But I wish to fight you. Alone..."
    Lydia: "Fine. Come forward."
    Dustin: "... bare-handed."
    Lydia: (pause) "You do this because you know swords to be my specialty."
    Dustin: "No. If I defeated you with a sword, what would be the honour in that? Then it would simply be steel that beat you. It's your body that should do the fighting."
    Lydia: "What if I refuse?"
    Dustin: "This battle is on my terms. If you want your friends to live, you will fight hand to hand. Otherwise, they die."

    Lyd

Otherwise, they die."

    Lydia: "You use my heart against me, having none of your own." I lay down my sword on the floor beside me and come forward slowly.
    Dustin: The two of you circle each other.

_This is where the combat mechanics of "Exalted" start coming into play. There are two hand-to-hand combat statistics in_
Exalted: Brawl and Martial Arts. Shataina and Sara have exactly the same Physical Attributes, meaning they’re about as strong, quick, and tough as each other, but Sara is an incredibly good Brawler (she has 4 in the Brawl Ability) and Shataina is "merely" very good at Martial Arts (3). They fight. We roll out the battle using dice to represent their skill at fighting. It’s an even more uneven battle, because Sara’s combat magic applies to her hand-to-hand skills, while Shataina only has magic for her sword. So, naturally, Shataina is losing.

In fact, I, as Shataina’s player, rolled exceptionally badly during this fight. This means that my dice tended to roll much worse than average, while Sara, whose dice were being rolled by Dustin, did pretty well. In game terms, this means that Shataina was quite unlucky: she tended to do things like slip, and fall over, and be unable to get up because Sara was too fast for her.

I’ll skip most of the fight because it isn’t important, but the last three seconds of the fight looked roughly like this:

Dustin: Okay, Lydia. You've got a broken rib (in game terms, this means that I'm losing dice from my physical actions because it's harder to move), and you've slipped and fallen. What do you do?

Lydia: Damn it. Where’s my sword?

Dustin: Right beside you.

Lydia: Okay, fine. I pick it up and stand up and attack.

Shataina rolled slightly better than Sara for this combat "round" (a combat round is three seconds of combat), so she gets to go first. She grabs her sword, stands up, and attacks. Because combat goes so quickly and Shataina’s so amazing with a sword, I, as Shataina, hope that Shataina can defeat Sara quickly enough that, if Sara wasn’t bluffing about being able to call guards who will kill Shataina’s friends, Shataina will be able to put her down and release them quickly enough to get away.

Shataina has a powerful combat Charm for swords, so now the tables are turned. Shataina would normally attack Sara with 8 dice. She has 3 Dexterity, which measures how dexterous she is; 4 Melee, which measures her ability with hand-held weapons; the sword gives her 1 extra die because it’s a good weapon; and she’s losing a die because she’s hurt; $3 + 4 - 1 - 1 = 7$ dice. Sara is trying to block the attack with her arms (she has a Charm that allows her to block sharp things with her bare hands without getting hurt). Sara has 3 Dexterity, 4 Brawl, no special weapons, and isn’t hurt, so her dice to block come to 7. However, Shataina’s Charm enables her to double her Dexterity and Melee for the purposes of one attack. So now her dice to attack Sara come to $(3 + 4) \times 2 + 1 - 1 - 14$. In an "opposed roll" like combat, Shataina has to get more successes on her attack dice than Sara gets on her block dice in order to hit her enemy.

Obviously, when Shataina uses her attack Charm, she has 14 dice to attack and Sara has 7 dice to block; it’s really unlikely that she wouldn’t hit, and hit well. Lydia rolls 14 dice for Shataina, and Dustin rolls 7 dice for Sara. Lydia gets a lot more successes than Dustin. She hits and wounds Sara. The sword has poison on it, so Dustin now rolls some other dice to see whether Sara is affected by the poison. The dice do badly on the roll, so the poison starts hurting Sara right away. Hypothetically, if Dustin, as Sara, had done well on the roll against the poison, she would have felt better; or if she had done really well, she could have just shrugged it off. But she did badly, so she’s pretty messed up.

After all this:

Dustin: Okay, so you hit Sara in the shoulder with your sword. She backs up, puts one hand to the wound, and looks at you angrily.

Lydia: I attack her again. Are any guards coming?

Dustin: No, and Sara hasn’t called for any. She falls back. You can see pretty quickly that she’s being affected by the poison. Do you want to keep using magic?

Lydia: No, I don’t bother.

Dustin: Well, she can barely block now, anyway. Sara stumbles back and falls to the ground. She's becoming pale and looks very ill. "Arlan," she calls. "Save me. Now."

Lydia: Eep!

Dustin: Above, on the balcony, you see Arlan step out from behind a pillar. He looks down at you and begins casting a spell. You can see the magic flaring all around him; the spell will go off pretty soon.

Lydia: "Arlan!"

Dustin: Arlan lowers his arms and, all around you, wooden withes begin to sprout from the Manse's floor. They grab you. If you want to struggle, you have to make a Dexterity + Martial Arts roll.

Lydia rolls her Dexterity (3) plus Martial Arts (3) minus 1 for her wound. She had 5 dice, and she gets no successes. One of the dice came up 1. Because she got no successes and one or more of her dice came up 1, she "botched." This means that something
Dust: The wooden shackles have you in a secure hold. They're inflicting damage every turn. You botched, so there's no way you can escape them. In a few rounds, you'll be unconscious.

Lydia: "Arlan!" I cry. "How can you do this to me?"

Dust: Sara shouts, "Kill her, Arlan! She's a demon! She's nothing to you!"

Lydia: "She lies, Arlan! Remember how she lies!"

Dust now decides, in secret, that Sara will use a Charm to persuade Arlan to do what she wants him to, because he, as the Storyteller, thinks that this is a logical action for Sara. Sara knows a powerful social Charm that allows her to make someone angry at someone else. She turns on the Charm, using it on Arlan.

Dust: Sara cries, "She left you, Arlan. She left you to rot!" Arlan looks down at you and begins to cast another spell. The magic whips around him furiously. The spell will go off in three seconds. What do you do?

Lydia: Oh no. What am I gonna do? I can't move, can I.

Dust: No, you can't. If you hadn't botched the roll to evade the vines, you might have been able to, but you did, and you can't.

Vinny: You should use a social Charm to convince him not to kill you.

Lydia: Yes, but I already used magic on my sword. If I use any more, I'll start glowing and he'll know I'm using a Charm on him.

Vinny: If you get enough successes, it might not matter that he knows; he'll be persuaded anyway. Besides, there's nothing else you can do.

Lydia: Argh! Fine. Okay. I spend almost all the rest of my magic on my most powerful social Charm. Shataina's most powerful social Charm allows her to double most of her dice to convince someone else to do something.

Shataina's normal dice pool to persuade someone, as I previously discussed, is 10: 3 for her Manipulation, 5 for her Presence, and 2 extra dice for persuasion. She goes through a ton of magic and begins to glow, doubling her Manipulation and her Presence. Now she has \[(3 + 5) \times 2\] + 2, that's 18, dice to convince Arlan not to kill her. Arlan has a relatively strong will; his Willpower statistic is 6. He's also very angry at Shataina because Sara used her own magic on him. Dust now secretly decides that Shataina has to get 3 more successes than Arlan's Willpower to convince him, because he has a strong will and he's really mad, so Dust, based on consideration and experience, thinks that this is an appropriate number. Shataina now has to get 9 or more successes; this would be very unlikely, if she didn't have that incredible social Charm.

Dust: Right then, Lydia. You spend your magic and turn on your Charm. You're glowing with enough sunlight to light up a city. What are you saying?

Lydia: I have three seconds?

Dust: Yes.

Lydia: "You said you loved me!"

Dust: Good one. Roll your dice.

Shataina rolls 18 dice and gets 12 successes. This is an awful lot.

Dust: Arlan looks down at you, then looks at Sara. A gigantic, whirling blade of magic forms in his hands. He points down, and the magical blade whirls down at you ... and slices off Sara's head. This is the last thing you see, because the vines constrict around your throat, and you fall unconscious.

The way I'm going to write up that particular game session, as a part of Shataina's Story, will look something like this:

Long description of the Manse: dragon motifs on the walls, the eerie emptiness, and the darkness of the night. Description of Shataina's anxiety and fear, and how she steel's herself before she walks in. Description of what Shataina thinks when she sees Kulo and Tara, and then her dull shock at the sight of Mnemon Sara.

I write out the conversation between Sara and Shataina, adding my own tones, subtexts, and explaining what Shataina is seeing and thinking the entire time.

I write out a relatively brief description of the battle.

I write out Shataina's decision to pick up her sword and fight Sara with it. She knows it's dishonourable to fight Sara with a sword, but Sara did force her into agreeing to fight bare-handed, and Kulo and Tara's lives
are on the line. She forces back her distaste and feelings of dishonour so that she'll have a chance.

I describe Sara as she begins to lose.

I describe Shataina's further shock at seeing Arlan. I describe her panic and the experience of being tied down and unable to fight. I describe how upset and betrayed she gets to feel. Then I describe how conflicted she feels about using social magic on Arlan: she doesn't feel as if it's ethical to use it on him — it's almost like mind control, and she doesn't like the fact that she has to use it — but she knows she'll die if she doesn't. Her need to live triumphs, and she uses the Charm, although she feels ashamed. She watches Arlan kill Sara, glances up at him one last time, and then the world goes black as she falls unconscious. (When she wakes up, Arlan has dispelled his sorcerous vines and put her safely into an upper room in the Manse ... but that's a story for another day.)

Clearly, the differences between a game and a novel are many, and I'll be talking about them in what follows. The only thing I really need to note here, however, is the fact that because the actions are so often in the hands of the dice, Shataina can fail — and she can die. There are some referees who keep this from happening by lying to their players about what their dice have actually rolled (because if they are faithful to what the dice actually rolled, then the player's character will die); there are other referees who just stack the odds in the player's character's favour so that it's exceedingly unlikely that the character will die. Dustin does neither of these things, and it means that every time Shataina fights, there is an element of real danger to her — and sometimes, catastrophic story effects are caused by the dice, effects that neither Dustin nor I ever intended. I'll discuss this further later in this Introduction.

Part III. Playing Shataina and Writing Shataina
(also known as: The Bizarre Internal Workings of One Fangirl's Mind)

When I began to write out the game as a novel over Christmas break of my junior year, I had no idea how complex a process I was beginning. In retrospect, I find myself incredibly naïve: how could I have thought that it would be easy? I first wrote a huge outline of most of the events I could remember from the story; this took, literally, hours and hours to do (and I never even finished it — I admit that I became impatient with outlining and skipped straight to the writing). Within a week, I had my first 40 or 50 pages.

After this, my progress slowed: events in the real world interfered with my quiet, self-absorbed, dark little attic room, and I was actually forced to do things like go outside and talk to my parents and friends. Shataina's Story languished for a little while, and for months, I didn't add much to what I already had. Then, over the summer, I started working again, my thesis idea having been approved. I began to get my first criticism from friends that I'd asked to read my story right before school started.

The most important criticism I received was that people wanted more about Shataina's life in the Realm. They complained that the Prelude, as I called it, wasn't detailed enough, failing to satisfactorily demonstrate her pre-Exaltation life in the Realm. At this point, the entire subplot that involves Peleps Jikor hadn't happened; in the original game of Shataina, Dustin and I simply briefly went through a couple of scenes in the Realm (Shataina's graduation, for example) and then skipped to her Exaltation. The timeline of the game truly started with Shataina in the South — after the end of the writing that I've presented here.

I found myself in a bit of a quandary. I decided that it would be a good idea for me to write more about Shataina's life in the Realm, but I didn't know where to start. I was also a little iffy about it, because after Shataina left the Realm, she never went back (or at least, she hasn't yet — it's possible that she will in the future; after all, the game does continue to this day). I didn't want to spend too much time setting up a piece of her life that wasn't going to be at all relevant to the rest of the game. But after some thought, I concluded that it would help establish her as a character, shedding light on her background, and that even if the Realm itself doesn't come up again, some of the characters from the Realm certainly do (for example, Shataina met Arlan again after she left) and I could use this as an opportunity to help flesh out her relationships with them as well.
I still wasn't sure how to set it up, though; I didn't want to make up too many scenes out of whole cloth, because I wanted to preserve the original idea of writing out a game, not making up a novel. Finally, I hit upon the idea of asking Dustin to make up a subplot for me. That is, I asked him to go back to when Shataina was a mortal, and Storytell a brief game that was set before Shataina's Exaltation. The subplot he made up was the one involving Pelep's Jikor, in which Jikor plots to marry Shataina and fails. In other words, the original game of Shataina didn't involve Jikor at all; Dustin and I played out the subplot after we'd already been playing the rest of the game for months.

This meant that some of the ways that I related to characters in the subplot were, perhaps, slightly biased. When Dustin and I played the subplot, for example, I already knew that Shataina and Arlan were going to, later in the story, meet up again and travel together; I also knew that she would eventually fall hopelessly in love with him, and that he would die trying to protect her. Because I'm so involved with Shataina, I myself have a certain affection for Arlan; and so, although I never intended for her to be in love with him before her Exaltation, I perhaps played her (and portrayed her in my writing) as having a bit more affection for him than I had originally planned, because I couldn't completely keep myself from thinking of him as her lover. The scene in which Shataina thinks she's leaving the Realm and won't see him again also affected me more than I thought it would, because although I knew intellectually that she wasn't leaving him for a long time (she didn, after all, have to be in the Realm with him for her Exaltation, because I knew how that was going to happen), it reminded me of the scene in which Arlan had (later in the storyline) died. (His death made me cry, and I was depressed for weeks — an emotion which perhaps manifested itself in Shataina's clinginess with Arlan in the Jikor subplot.) All this isn't necessarily a problem, however — it's just a kind of side effect of the fact that we played most of the game that's presented here well after most of the entire game was over with.

Another problem with the game as a novel is the fact that, as noted when I quoted a survey respondent earlier, roleplaying games are not the result of a "unified artistic vision." Dustin and I can't share the exact same artistic vision, because we're two different people; but in terms of Shataina's Story, this really wasn't that big of a problem at all, because Dustin and I have such similar ideals that the story shaped itself fairly well between us. Also, although he's offered me criticism on the novelization, he hasn't attempted to help me write it. The only real problem that I have sometimes had with Dustin's ideals being opposed to my own, in terms of games, is that he prefers to make most of his games incredibly gritty and difficult for the characters; Shataina's Story was no exception. He enjoys a kind of one-thing-after-another feeling to his games — he prefers for his players to have a desperate feeling of continual failure, and the knowledge that if they do succeed, it will probably lead to something worse. In some ways, this bothers me because I think that Shataina has become a more tragic character than I would like; a lot of terrible things have happened to her, and she's become, in some ways, a martyr over the course of the entire story. But here, in the fiction I've presented, we see her as the naive young girl who has no idea that terrible things are about to happen to her; and so this vague disparity between Dustin's particular preferences and mine is essentially irrelevant in terms of this thesis.

Yet another problem with converting this particular section of the game to a novel is the fact that, as has been made abundantly clear, a game is a participatory experience and a novel is a planned one. Just like the experience of real life, things can turn out unexpectedly, no matter how much we think about them beforehand. The best example of this in the Prelude is the scene in which Pelep's Jikor's perfidy is revealed. Dustin thought that he'd given me so many clues that I would certainly figure out who the villain was in time for the denouement, but there were two problems he didn't think about.

The first has to do with the fact that Dustin is the referee for a lot of games, and I am a player in most of them, although I play different characters in each. That is, he might run an "Exalted" game in which I play a character who is a Dragon-Blooded calligrapher, rather than playing Shataina; the game would obviously have a different plot, probably be set in a different place, etcetera. And the last three Water-Aspected characters that Dustin introduced into his games were villains. In fact, the villains in Dustin's games are so often Water-Aspected Dragon-Bloods that it has become an inside joke among us. So, since Jikor was a Water Aspect, I, as Shataina's player, thought, "Oh, Dustin can't possibly be making the villain in this story a Water Aspect again! — so it couldn't possibly have been Jikor who did it!"
The other reason I didn't figure it out was that I knew from the start of the game what was causing the "duplicating people" effect — I knew about the spell that shifts appearances; it is detailed in The Book of Three Circles, a sourcebook for "Exalted" that discusses sorcery. However, Shataina, the character, didn't know about the spell when the game started, and therefore I consciously "blocked" myself from considering it — I wouldn't let myself think about the fact that the villain would have to be a trained sorcerer (because only a sorcerer would be capable of casting a spell like that). So when Shataina finally learned that it was a spell, I had already put the knowledge too far out of my mind to fully consider it — and I didn't have time to sit down and think about it, because the time that passed between the part in which Shataina finds out that a spell is capable of changing someone's face (that is, the part in which Arlan receives the little blue winged messenger from the Heptagram) and the part in which Arlan is confronted by Jikor and saved by Sara only lasted about five minutes and was filled with conversation with the other characters in the game.

Dustin expected me to be quicker on my mental feet than I was (although I'm not sure he should have; he does know me, after all), and thought that I'd figure out what was going on. When I didn't, he had Sara figure it out and save the day. This makes the scene, I think, less dramatically appropriate and, perhaps, also less satisfying than it would have been had Shataina figured it out, and I have a lot of trouble both writing and conceptualizing that scene because it seems so, well, off — as if what happened "shouldn't" have happened the way it did; as if the story should work differently.

But the worst problem with the game's conversion to a narrative comes from the fact that not only will the players occasionally fail to act as the Storyteller predicted, but the dice will sometimes do things that are completely unexpected — they're dice, after all. For example, in the aforementioned scene in which Arlan died, Dustin didn't think that the battle would play out the way it did at all — but the dice did really badly for Shataina and her friends, and really well for their enemy, and Arlan ended up dying. Neither Dustin nor I were at all happy that it happened, but it did, and we weren't (and aren't) going to change it.

This raises a natural question. "It's just a game," one might say. "The events aren't set in stone, are they? You could just go back and say that something different happened. Or, if you don't want to do that within the game as a game, then you, Lydia, could just do it within the book that you're writing from the game. Why are you allowing the events of a fictitious storyline to limit your poetic license? As a writer and a storyteller, you positively should change scenes that you aren't comfortable with."

The answer to that is, quite simply: as much as I might pretend to change the events of the story, they wouldn't have happened any differently. Playing out Shataina's Story was a participatory experience, and because she, the character, assumed a kind of reality in my mind, so did the events. Changing the events feels vaguely wrong, and certainly invalid. Saying that something happened differently, even for the purposes of the novelization, would simply be a lie. In this way, I think that I feel somewhat similar to the way that J.R.R. Tolkien felt when he wrote about Middle-Earth: Christina Scull quotes him as saying, "[The stories of the Silmarillion] arose in my mind as 'given' things .... always I had the sense of recording what was already 'there', somewhere; not of 'inventing'" (9). The events of Shataina's Story are "'given'." I am recording something that is "'there', somewhere" — something that cannot, ought not, be changed. It has, of course, been pointed out to me that Tolkien did not experience his tales of Middle-Earth the same way I experienced Shataina's story, but I think that his opinion is still worth noting because it demonstrates, to my mind, that I needn't feel that I am necessarily odd, shameful, or even unique for ascribing a sense of reality to the story and being unwilling to change the "'given'" things about it.

At the same time, I feel that my poetic license is not nearly as limited as some might think (and have implied). The best way I can explain this is by referring to the tragedies of such antique Greek writers as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, which I have studied at some length. These tragedians (and others like them) took the myths of their time — the truth of which, I must note, was a matter of religion — and made plays of them. For example, all three wrote tragedies that involved the characters of King Agamemnon's family, during and after his homecoming from the Trojan War — and yet each play is quite different; the characters are quite different; all three tragedians, for example, have radically different takes on the character of Electra,
Agamemnon's daughter. And yet they could not, and did not, change the events of the sacred myths. They simply lent their own "slant," their own flavour, to the narratives, portraying them in different ways to suit themselves.

No one would ever have said that Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides lacked poetic license; the very thought is absurd! I find the concept that I might lack poetic license, while retelling Shataina's Story, to be equally absurd. And unlike the ancient poets, I have considered the idea of changing the events of the story; one might say that I have more poetic license than they did, for they could not have changed the events of their plays without going against their religion — a choice that I would contend was probably very close to inconceivable. I, at least, thought about the option, and chose to keep the story in line with its "actual" events.

The greatest changes I have made to the narrative lie in simply leaving things out. I don't feel that it betrays the spirit of the story to leave out scenes we played through that aren't necessarily important, or are confusing, any more than it would betray the story not to mention the fact that Shataina had milk with her breakfast on a given morning. For example, for the Prelude, I left out an entire series of scenes in which Shataina has a bizarre encounter with a demon, for the reasons that (a) I didn't want to bother explaining too much about the demon to my audience (and believe me, it would have taken a lot of explaining) and (b) the demon-encounter doesn't contribute anything in particular to the story besides an extremely esoteric and easy-to-miss clue about the Jikor subplot.

So, I contest that I have poetic license, despite remaining faithful to the events of the game. But the excellent question has been asked by several people: how much of the story is my creation? What in the story comes from Dustin? What of it is from the "Exalted" main rulebook? Am I giving myself too much credit — or too little?

What came from the "Exalted" main rulebook (colloquially known as the Core) and from other rulebooks for the "Exalted" game (published by White Wolf Game Studio) is much of the setting, as well as the rules for how to create the statistics for a certain character and the rules for how to use the statistics and dice to play the game (those last two together are colloquially known as mechanics). Examples of things that came from the Core include Shataina's magical powers (the Charm she knows that allows her to tell when people are lying, for example, is called "Judge's Ear Technique" and is detailed on page 185). The concepts of, say, the Dragon-Blooded and the Solar Exalted also came from the Core. There is further detail on the Dragon-Blooded, the Great Houses (such as Mnemon, Peleps and Ledaal) and the Realm itself in the book Exalted: the Dragon-Blooded, and many of the "hard facts" about them both came from there (for example, the city of Tuchara, which Arlan and Shataina mention in passing in Chapter 4, is in fact a city which is described on page 38 of Exalted: the Dragon-Blooded). The glass city of Chiaroscur, where Shataina tells her first story, has a few pages devoted to it in the book Scavenger Sons; Princess Magnificent, Shataina's greatest enemy, is mentioned in a few different books. There's more, but it's all too much to list.

The setting is quite detailed, but it's not so detailed that there's no room for creativity — in fact, there's a great deal of room for creativity, and everyone who plays the game invariably has his or her own "take" on it. Because Dustin was Storytelling the game for Shataina, it was his "take" that mostly defined the "hard facts" about the "Exalted" setting. Whenever I asked a question — for example, "Where on the map is Tuchara?" — Dustin would probably refer to one of the rulebooks; but if he decided that Tuchara's location was silly and that it ought to be elsewhere, his word would define the in-game "truth" for us. Dustin indeed often makes up his own rules for things in the "Exalted" setting (a process colloquially known as house ruling), and his house rules often actually contradict the actual Core and other books released by White Wolf — he thinks he's come up with better ways to do some things (and is, in my entirely biased opinion, quite correct). But even beyond his changes to the "Exalted" setting, when he runs a game, he utilizes the setting to create a plot and more specific setting information for those playing the game. Essentially, he controls just about everything in the game that isn't Shataina, as was, I hope, demonstrated in Part II.

For example, it was Dustin who decided the statistics for every character in the game besides Shataina. He created the entire city of Gemsport, where Shataina meets Jaren and much of the rest of the game (after the
part that I've presented here) was set. He created the vast majority of the other characters in the story (there are a few whose concepts I came up with when I was deciding on Shataina's history; for example, I decided that Shataina's Exaltation happened during a jealous confrontation over a man. But in those cases, he appropriated them and gave them secrets and some further details; for example, it was he who named Arlan, described him, and gave him a history). He invented the orb that I mentioned in my earlier discussion of Shataina's conflict with the Diplomat; the Diplomat herself was fleshed out and detailed by him, based on a "template" published in the Core (a template that describes your typical everyday Fair Folk diplomat). All this should make it clear why I stated on my Acknowledgments page that Dustin would indeed be best served by a co-author credit.

So what should I get credit for? As I hope was also made clear by Part II, Dustin doesn't describe very much; roleplaying games with him are very action-focused. Thus, just about all of the description in the narrative that I have written is mine. I've tried to use dialogue I recall from our playing of the game when I remember it, but obviously I can't remember it all; so much of the dialogue is also made up by me. Everything Shataina does is what I did in the game when I was playing, and everything she thinks and feels and imagines is my own (and often comes from how I felt about the scene in question, when I was playing her). I have indeed made up a few scenes — not very many, and none that change the action, but some; for example, the scene in Chapter 3 in which Shataina and Mnemon Lin talk in her room was entirely my own invention.

After the example in Part II of playing out a scene in a roleplaying game, I tried to explain how I would write it out. Now, in order to demonstrate how much of this story really is my work, I'll try to do the reverse, explicating a sample of my own writing.

These paragraphs are from Chapter 1:

[Shataina] felt encouraged when she saw him do a slight, well-disguised double-take at her approach, his eyes narrowing in appreciation. Setting her face in a polite smile, she bowed, then waited for him to speak first.

"Well-performed," he said briefly in his rumbling deep bass, and shook her hand. His skin was rough beneath her fingers; he was Earth-Aspected, like most of House Mnemon, and the advancing years showed themselves in a stony texture to his skin, a scent of freshly turned soil. "Congratulations," he said, then turned and walked away.

Firstly, I made up the entire first paragraph. When Dustin and I played that scene, he didn't mention anything like the "slight, well-disguised double-take" — that is something that I think would have happened, being as Shataina is so beautiful, and her father isn't used to it (because he's been away so long). When I say that she "felt encouraged," I'm "making that up" based on my own feelings of how she felt. This is not a particularly dramatic scene, and it is also a scene from the very beginning of the game when I wasn't necessarily as emotionally invested in Shataina as I now am; and so I can't say that I felt "her" emotions as much as I think I did later in the game, when, for example, I myself wept at Arlan's death. But I feel confident that I can say that Shataina "felt encouraged" because I know how she would feel in that (or any) situation. I can't remember if, during the actual game session that this scene took place in, I ever actually stated that Shataina, "[s]etting her face in a polite smile ... bowed, then waited for him to speak first," but I'm quite sure that if I did state it, it would be something more along the lines of me simply saying to Dustin, "My father is approaching? Okay, I bow."

Dustin, controlling Shataina's father, had him say "Well-performed" and "Congratulations" (or something — I don't remember the exact words). He also told me that Shataina's father shook her hand, then walked away — in other words, he gave the skeleton of this event. My description of Shataina's father is influenced by Exalted: the Dragon-Blooded, which tells us, firstly, that Dragon-Blooded exhibit elemental markings of their patron Elemental Dragon (158) (giving some examples of "elemental markings", such as the scent of soil that I mention [167]); secondly, that those markings get more blatant as a given Dragon-Blood ages (164 - 173); and thirdly, that the majority of House Mnemon is Earth-Aspected (94). Dustin, who created the character of Shataina's father, decided that he was Earth-Aspected, but he never told me what form the elemental markings take for this particular gentleman, so it was left up to me (and I therefore decided on a sort of granite feel and deep rockslide-ish voice, which I felt suited the character best).
No dice were involved in this particular event (dice only become involved when a character is attempting an action which has a notable chance of failure, and walking up to someone and shaking his or her hand is not such an action).

Essentially, the entire process of writing Shataina's story involves a process like the one I've detailed here: first Dustin and I play the game, using the springboard of the setting that White Wolf Game Studio has set up; then I take the game and form it into the narrative, keeping the bare-bone events that Dustin has given me, but fleshing it out and adding subtext, explanations, description, Shataina's thoughts and biases, and general "slant."

"Slant" is my term for the process I go through when I try to formulate these events into a coherent and dramatic narrative. Because I refuse to change the "actual" events of the game when crafting Shataina's story, it falls to me, during this writing, to do what I can to "justify" the events of the story — to "slant" them into a real story. What especially interests me about the process is the fact that almost all of the events of the story — even the ones that took me and Dustin by surprise, because the dice unexpectedly succeeded or failed — seem almost naturally dramatically appropriate.

The best example of this is Shataina's final death scene, which took place long after the events of the Prelude that I have presented here.

Shataina, in this scene, decided to fight her Ultimate Supernemy, a terrible being named Princess Magnificent. Shataina had no chance of survival, and she knew that this was essentially true. Towards the end of the scene, Shataina was physically fighting Princess Magnificent; the Princess was throwing black daggers at Shataina, and Shataina was trying to parry them. As I discussed in Part I, this required an "opposed roll": the Princess rolled twelve dice to throw the dagger at Shataina, and Shataina rolled sixteen dice to parry the dagger (she was putting all her effort into it, and therefore running out of magical power very fast). Twelve dice versus sixteen dice means that Shataina had rather good odds for succeeding at the roll and therefore parrying the dagger — but she didn't succeed at the roll; she quintuple botched the roll. In other words, none of those sixteen dice came up 7 or above, and five of them came up 1. This is an incredibly bad result, and it is also astronomically improbable.

Dustin decided that the results of this roll meant that Shataina was knocked back, fell to the ground, took the black dagger in the eye, was poisoned, couldn't move for a few minutes because she was stunned, and lost her sword because it flew out of her hand and fell a good ten feet away.

Shataina had barely enough magic left to power her most potent persuasive Charm, and I, the player (and she, the character) both knew that she was about to die. So I decided that she used the last of her magic to bring herself to her knees, face Princess Magnificent, use the powerful persuasive Charm, and thereby persuade Princess Magnificent that it was a bad idea to remain and that it was in her interest to stop her plans to conquer the South, go home, and leave humanity alone. Then Shataina fell into a deathly coma (and was granted new life by the gods as the Goddess of Stories, but that's a tale for another day.)

What is interesting about this scene is that one die roll — the quintuple botch on sixteen dice. It seems like a really awful thing to happen, but in fact it was exactly what was dramatically appropriate. If Shataina had kept fighting, she would eventually have run out of magical power and died. But because she quintuple botched that roll, she had no option to keep fighting. If she hadn't done quite as badly, she would merely have kept getting more and more wounded, and kept on desperately fighting, because that's the kind of person she is (the kind of person I make her). Because she didn't have the option to keep physically fighting, she (I) had to reformulate her (my) strategy, and attempt persuasion, using the last of her magic — which worked; and fighting would not have worked — if she had kept physically fighting, she would have lost, and died pointlessly.

It seems that the dice are thus, in some indefinable way, "on my side" — or perhaps this is merely some form of superstition that I have developed; a kind of faith that probability itself is on the side of her story, as if

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1 I mentioned earlier that it is impossible for the gods in the "Exalted" gameworld to bring people back from the dead. This is true. However, when Shataina was about to die, the gods caught her just before she died and told her that she could either die, or return to the living world. She accepted their offer and thus "came back to life," although not in a technical sense, since she never quite died — she was merely on the cusp.
it, too, knows the way it should be.

There has only been one instance in which I felt "betrayed" by the dice — for which I can't think of a dramatic justification. This particular bit of Shataina's Story needs a lot of explanation if I'm going to get it across, so bear with me.

An awful lot of stuff has happened, and it's become an extremely complex plot. Shataina is carrying an orb of great magical power. This orb contains the soul of a Solar Exalt from the First Age — a Solar Exalt who was thousands of years old, extraordinarily powerful, and incredibly wicked and cruel. Shataina doesn't know anything about the orb save that it's extraordinarily powerful and that it seems to have an intelligence of its own; it seems to hate the Folk Fairy more than anything; and, further, that it's having an effect on her — it's making her less compassionate, less merciful, braver, and crueler. She's trying to control it, but she isn't willing to throw it away, and the effects become more pronounced as time passes.

Shataina is captured by one of her arch-enemies, who ends up putting her in a dungeon with no food or water and only the orb for company. Shataina, desperate, begs the orb to help her (knowing that it's powerful and it has its own intelligence) before she finally passes out.

When she awakens, she finds herself in the middle of the city, Gemsport. She's holding an iron spear and she's surrounded by dead bodies and cowering townspeople. She sees a few of her allies, and she asks them what happened. They tell her that she simply walked into town, heading for the castle, and killed everyone in her path. They tell her that they've never seen her fight like that before. Disturbed, Shataina concludes that the force in the orb had possessed her, and wonders what she, in her possessed state, could have wanted with the castle. One of her friends mentions that Arlan has been captured by the town guards and taken to the castle to be executed. Shataina, horrified, decides to go to the castle and see if she can break him out. She thinks that the orb possessed her in order to get into the castle, and she's uneasy because she doesn't think that the orb cares about Arlan; so why would it have been going to the castle? She doesn't know. But she walks to the castle anyway.

At the gates, she's met by a former ally who betrayed her, and twenty guards. She warns them to stand aside, but they don't. She calls upon the power of the orb and "loses consciousness" again; when she comes to, all of the guards are dead at her feet, and she realizes that every time she allows the orb to take her over, she'll have to fight it harder and harder to control her own body. She also realizes that whatever was in the orb tried to kill her friends before she took control of her body back. So whatever is in the orb is clearly evil, and if she calls upon it again, she might not be able to come back.

She goes into the palace, looking for Arlan. She can't find him anywhere; finally, she simply walks to the throne room, intimidates the guards into letting her pass without a fight, and goes in.

In the throne room, she finds her other arch-nemesis, the Fair Diplomat, who's one of the Fair Folk. Shataina realizes that the orb only wanted to come to the castle because it hates the Fair Folk, and it knew that there was one of the Fair Folk in the castle. She also thinks that she simply cannot defeat the Diplomat on her own power.

This is where the dice started to become really important. I, as Shataina's player, knew that she probably couldn't beat the Diplomat with a sword. I also knew that if I let the orb take Shataina over, it would gladly kill the Diplomat, but that Shataina might not get her body back. So I decided for Shataina to use her most powerful persuasive Charm to try and convince the Diplomat to give up and go home. I used the Charm (spending most of Shataina's magic), rolled my dice, and failed.

The Diplomat, therefore, was unimpressed by Shataina's attempt at intimidation, and she told her bodyguards to attack Shataina. I knew that Shataina couldn't possibly win the fight; she had no magic left, because she'd spent it all on her persuasive Charm. The only way Shataina could survive was to call upon the orb. So I decided on that option; she called upon the orb, and the orb took her over.

Once the orb had killed the Diplomat, Shataina wanted control of her body back. Through the haze of unconsciousness, she could hear Arlan calling her name, and she knew that if she didn't retake her own body, then whatever was possessing her body might kill him. So, in order for Shataina to take her body back, I had
to attempt a really difficult roll. The thing about this particular dice-roll — the dice-roll for Shataina to take her body back — is that the first time Shataina had to roll it (when she "awoke" in the middle of the city), it was difficult; and it got harder and harder every time I had to roll it. At this point, when I had to make it one last time, it was almost impossible. So I rolled it, and I failed.

So, officially, at this point, Shataina lost her body to the orb, and although she wasn't technically dead, she wasn't alive, either.

This was traumatic.

Dustin was, at first, unwilling to do anything about it; he didn't want to change anything that had happened, and if that meant that she died, he was prepared to make that sacrifice. But I'd gotten so attached that the concept of Shataina's death was simply horrifying. When he saw how terribly devastated I was, he finally consented to do what he could to fix the situation. This was one of the only two times in which Dustin actually consented to going back in time and changing events — and the other time it happened, he did it only because Shataina died, as well.

However, the only way we could feel okay about "changing the past" in the game was to find a place that he could change it realistically — that is, make a change that made sense, and could save Shataina — a change that we could both accept as having been "what actually happened all along".

The first thing he tried was to introduce a new rule. He created a rule that allowed me to add more dice than I would normally be able to add to the roll that would let Shataina break free of the orb — in fact, I was able to add enough dice to make it likely that I would succeed the roll. But I tried the roll again, and I failed it again — thereby making it effectively impossible to leave the scene exactly as it had been, and necessitating some change in events to allow Shataina to live.

So Dustin went back over the sequence of events that led up to Shataina losing her body to the orb. At last, the event that he isolated that was most important was the first roll I mentioned: Shataina's attempt to intimidate the Diplomat into leaving. He allowed me to add extra dice to that roll, creating a new rule so that I could do so. I made the roll again, and this time I succeeded.

In terms of the game, what this means is that Shataina didn't fail her intimidation roll against the Diplomat — she succeeded; she had succeeded all along. So we went back in time and decided that the Diplomat, intimidated by Shataina's magic, left, and Shataina, therefore, never had to call upon the power of the orb, and thus never lost her body to the orb.

I really don't like thinking about that scene; just considering it can make me want to break things. It bothers, infuriates, me to remember it. I feel as if the way it should have ended was for Shataina to have done everything the way she did, but succeeded at the roll to take her body back from the orb. I know exactly how I would write it, if that had happened; I know how I would retell the story; it just feels right. But it didn't happen right.

I don't feel as if I can change it; and yet I feel as if I know how it should have played out. I feel as if the dice hadn't failed that all-important last roll, the story would have been fine. It would have been so much better, mainly because it would have been as if the power of love called her back (or something like that) — as if she succeeded on that last roll because she heard Arlan calling her, and because she loved him. But the sad fact is that the power of love didn't call Shataina back, and that technically, she lost her body forever and killed Arlan!

This feels almost like a, for lack of a better word, betrayal. It's as if Fate, which seemed to prefer that all the rest of the story work out in a dramatically appropriate fashion, turned around and slapped me in the face. I keep trying to think of ways to portray that scene, to slant it so that it works, but I can't seem to figure it out. I simply can't find a way to feel satisfied with that scene.

Perhaps part of it is the fact that my imagined ending for that scene had a great deal of power for me. I had a lovely overdramatic picture of Shataina making a stupendous effort of will, fighting past the fog that had her captured, and awakening with Arlan saying her name. Then she could theatrically say his name, and go on
to huskily confess something like, "I came back when I heard you say my name ... I ..." and then falter and gaze at him. Or something — something that would imply that she was able to come back for him, that when her loyalty was tested she was able to triumph with her will and come out on top — I feel, I know, that sheer will, bolstered by love, ought to be able to do anything.

But it didn't.

And yet, as I have said before, I view Shataina's Story as slightly more of a memoir than a novel. So why does it bother me so much that one of the events turned out differently from the way I would have had it turn out? People don't agonize over the way events "should have worked out" in real life, do they?

Well, actually, of course, they do. People often idealize the way they want things to be and then are disappointed by the "sad reality." It is perhaps something like the proverbial woman who always wanted a ruby engagement ring and is therefore disappointed by a diamond one.

I think the main problem with this scene is, as with the woman and the ruby ring, the fact that I allowed myself to imagine the ideal ending before it actually ended. And I think that this also demonstrates a way in which playing such a game is close to reality: although it's a fantasy game, full of ideals and, well, fantasies, still we can be disappointed with the outcome of events.

And that disappointment lends it another sense of reality; and so I can draw satisfaction from that, at least — the fact that I can be distressed about a turn of events brings the story closer to reality, even if it makes it, I think, not quite as good a story. And when I consider it as a game rather than a story, then the random turn of events seems almost beneficial, since it helps keep me from imagining that I can always rely on the dice to do the dramatically appropriate thing — an unpleasant lesson to learn, for me; similar, I suppose, to that moment during youth when a person really realizes that he or she truly is mortal. And that, again, brings it even closer to reality; not only am I distressed by the turn of events, but I know that events won't always fall in line with the story, just as reality doesn't. In a vaguely ironic way, failing that all-important roll highlighted and contradicted one of my fantasies — that the importance or drama of an event could help it succeed or fail, as appropriate.

The question now, I think, becomes worth asking: is Shataina's Story worth redefining? Should I, in fact, be calling it a fantasy? Or, at this point, has it become something else — a memoir? Something even different?

Instinctively, I'm certain that it should remain fantasy — although perhaps memoir-fantasy, if there could be such a thing. It only remains, in my mind, to justify to myself how exactly the story is fantasy.

I've considered the different fantasy definitions that I've studied, and how they apply to Shataina's Story. The first one that I thought about was the idea of fantasy as an expression of ideals, or as a story that is written to prove a point. The only thing that came to mind when I considered this was the part I just mentioned already, in the game, which I was unable to reconcile against how I felt it should have happened. In a strange way, I have a bizarre superstitious feeling that the universe — that Fate itself — was trying to send me some kind of message by failing that all-important roll for me — the roll that would have freed Shataina from the orb. In my more esoterically depressed moments, I really do feel as if that roll failed, and "killed" Shataina, and lost her body to the orb, because I was supposed to learn something from the experience. As if the universe was trying to tell me that I should stop having faith in the power of love or something — that, in reality, love and willpower can't surmount everything, and shouldn't try.

This is a very distressing thought for me; the ideal of romantic love is one that I hold very close to my heart, and trying to argue it away from me is like trying to take a security blanket from a small, strong and fiercely dedicated child. But the interesting thing about the way it relates to Shataina's story is that it is as if I was trying to get across an ideal in the story I wanted to participate in — the game. I wanted the game to reinforce my ideal of romantic love. When it didn't, I took it personally.

This only, I think, proves my earlier point that didactic intentions should not define fantasy as a genre. Shataina's Story certainly isn't reinforcing my didactic intentions — if anything, it's reinforcing the didactic
intentions of the Universal Spirit, and She's not talking.

I suppose that one might contest that, because I got so upset that the game didn't reinforce my personal ideals — because I apparently, at least on some level, wanted it to do so — that I therefore ought to include reinforcement of ideals, or didactic intention, in my definition of fantasy, because it's obviously what I want from fantasy. However, I still don't think that a definition of fantasy should necessarily include didactic intentions on the writer's part; and I further think that the fact that I wanted the game, and the story, to fall in line with my ideals doesn't mean anything more than it does when people get upset when life doesn't fall in line with their ideals. After all, if I encountered an event in real life that seemed to directly contradict my feelings about how love "should" work the same way that particular scene in the game seemed to, I think I'd be at least as upset as I am by this. And just because I seem to vaguely expect a writer's (or Universal Spirit's) personal ideals to be reflected in a narrative they express or influence, I don't think that means that I think that narrative has didactic intentions — I think it just means that I'm a good little Simon's Rock student, and I've learned that what authors write tend to include or express what they care about and what they believe, even when they aren't specifically writing a book about what they care about and what they believe.

As for evoking a sense of wonder, I do believe that Shataina's Story brought a sense of wonder from me — a feeling that is close to the kind of wonder that I have, once or twice, experienced when something I always wanted, but never thought could happen, actually happened. It is like a reminder of that feeling Tolkien described, the description I keep coming back to, the "piercing glimpse of joy, of heart's desire." I believe I have gotten that feeling (or a feeling I would describe as being quite close to it) once or twice, at one or two of the more astonishingly wonderful moments in my own life; and I get a kind of extremely low-grade echo of that feeling when Shataina has her own especially dramatic moments — a glimpse of a glimpse, if you will. Perhaps the "wonder" I get from experiencing Shataina's "life" is something like catharsis; a more personal and convincing catharsis than that obtained from, say, reading a book or watching a play. I still don't think that "wonder" ought to be part of the overall and definitive definition of fantasy, but I believe that I do experience it from this fantasy, at least.

Tolkien's Recovery, Escape and Consolation and how they might relate ought to be mentioned as well. Consolation is, for Tolkien, I think, essentially the same thing as the "piercing glimpse of joy" that I talked about above. Escape, and how I experience it through Shataina's game, is rather obvious. Because writing recalls the game itself, it offers a similar kind of escape — although, interestingly enough, I have found that writing Shataina's story out has been a kind of escape from the game itself. Maybe it's something like the relieving and considering effect that I, at least, get when writing in a personal journal about how my life is going; writing out Shataina's story allows me to consider the way events affect her, and express the emotions they inspire, giving me a kind of relief from them; and focusing on these moments is yet another way to escape from the way that real life is actually affecting me. Writing out the story isn't the same as the "wonder" or "catharsis" I was talking about above, though, although it might also be described as "cathartic"; while the game allows me to experience emotions from Shataina's perspective, writing out the game allows me to consider and express them.

And Recovery? I'm really not entirely sure that Shataina's game helped me with Recovery, back during the semester when I played it all the time and was thinking about it all the time. I don't think it does now, though, either — now, when I play it far less often and consider it far less often. I suspect that I get so involved in the experience of being Shataina that it doesn't help me appreciate "real" life more — it feels more like another "real" life. Her viewpoint and general emotional reaction to things is mine, so there is no alternate viewpoint to gain Recovery from — I'm really just being myself in a different paradigm. I think that for Recovery to really take hold, it's necessary to have something really shake up the way one feels about things. For example, to Recover, one might relate extremely well to a character who is different from oneself; but since Shataina really isn't different from myself, when it gets down to it, Recovery just doesn't apply.

Having gone over the definitions I considered that fed into my own definition of fantasy, I've come to my own definition of fantasy. Does Shataina's story fit into my own definition of fantasy? Does it "imply the impossible but not necessarily express it"? 
Considering that Shataina's story is set in an entire alternate world, within which many events are impossible by our standards, I think that it's fairly obviously a fantasy story, even by my own esoteric definition. I certainly intended my definition to encompass stories that do considerably more than merely "imply" the impossible — for example, those that are set entirely within impossible paradigms; if I had not intended it so, then I would be forced to disinclude genre fantasy from the category of "fantasy", and that's not right. So it easily fits in my definition, which is good, because the definition would be flawed if it didn't.

So. We know it's fantasy. But is it also a memoir? The concept of a fantasy memoir astonishes me, when I consider it. Up till now, I would have considered it impossible, unless the memoirist in question were to make up elements of their memoir — which isn't okay, by my book; or, perhaps, to slant it so that it implies the impossible without directly expressing it — an intriguing idea, and one that I had not considered before. I wonder if anyone has done it before?

It seems obvious to me, though, no matter how astonishing the concept, that Shataina's Story is a memoir.

I consciously chose, from the start of this project, to write the story in the third person, despite the fact that I had (and still have) no intention of ever using the partial omniscience thus granted to look into the heads of any characters besides our heroine. I thought at first that this decision was made entirely because I wanted to separate Shataina from me more, and keep her at arm's-length, rather than acknowledging the closeness to myself that would be imparted by the first person. But when I think over the decision, I'm not so sure. I mentioned before that I have a tendency to chronicle my own life inside my mind; and when I think of myself doing things, I often call myself "she" — "she sat on her bed with her computer in her lap, weeping and sweating blood over her thesis," for example.

I'm not entirely sure where that tendency comes from; probably some sort of bizarre psychosis, or entirely too much self-consciousness on my part. Who knows? But the fact is that, because I so often think of myself in the third person, thinking of Shataina in the third person isn't necessarily a way to keep her separate. So I find myself, having thought that I was cleverly utilizing a tactic to keep her away, doubting that I really intended to.

And yet, intended or not, I find that Shataina's Story has done something to the way I relate to her. When I consider it, it comes to my mind as a further definition; Shataina, by means of her retold tale, has become a more defined character; in other words, I have a better handle on who she is — a handle I've been forced to come up with for the sake of characterization. And, I think, in this way, she's become more separate from me once again, after all. Knowing her as a character, however similar to myself and however close to my ideals, does the same thing it did when I first conceived of her as a character, back when I used to play online games — it makes me understand her differences, and the divide between us.

But she still feels, as J.R.R. Tolkien said, like a "given" thing. She is more definitely "there, somewhere," I think, than before. There's something about having the novelization, which I can go back to and read, edit, and reconsider, that gives her a certain unchanging solidity.

I've tried to decide whether or not this new feeling of reality is better or worse than the ill-defined

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2 It has been pointed out to me by the astute Peter Filkins that some memoirists have been known to fictionalize parts of their memoirs, or to make up events. The excellent Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary assures me that the definition of the word "memoir" is:

(noun) 1. a record of events written by a person having intimate knowledge of them and based on personal observation. 2. Usually, memoirs. a. an account of one's personal life and experiences: autobiography. b. the published record of the proceedings of a group or organization, as of a learned society. 3. a biography or biographical sketch. (1199)

I think that it is fairly clear that the definition that applies in this case will be either (1) or (2a). I suppose that neither of these definitions actually state that one ought not to lie in one's memoir(s), but it seems to me that every memoir I have ever had experience with has purported to be a true "record of events," not merely a record whose truth is in question — especially since they're "based on personal observation." Regardless, I am not at all comfortable with the idea of lying in a memoir, and I do not think that I, at least, would consider a memoir in which the author lied to properly be a memoir. Thus, regardless of other reasons I might have for not wanting to "lie about events" while writing Shataina's story, I think that furthermore, defining it as a memoir certainly places the expectation — or even requirement — upon me not to lie.
closeness to me that existed before; and once again I find myself coming back to the "memoir" simile. I have never written my memoirs, but I wonder: if I were to write them, would writing them lead me to make myself into a character, as well? When I think back over stories I've told to others about myself, I find that I very definitely did characterize myself — made myself come across in a certain way — portrayed myself in a certain light ... much the same way I did with Shataina.

And so, in the end, I think that this is a memoir — a fantasy-memoir. And thinking about it as a fantasy memoir gives me a reason for casting it in the light that I think it perhaps always really has been cast: it allows me to think of it the way that the Greek playwrights thought of their plays — as unalterable, real events, which retain their unalterable nature no matter how much is created around and about them.

Someone I know hesitated when I told him about my thesis, then said, "You know, I don't mean to offend you, but ... what's the point?"

It's a good question. What is the point of all this? Why do I feel the need to write out Shataina's story? The wise Jamie Hutchinson has suggested that perhaps I have written this as a way to assert my independence — that writing this out, my own way, without interference, allows me to impress my own artistic vision on Shataina's story, without being accountable to others (as I am accountable to Dustin while playing the game). It allows me to exert a kind of control, perhaps, that I can't exert when Dustin is running the game and the dice are defining the results of my actions.

Maybe I am not self-aware enough (a surprising question, I think, after four years of Simon's Rock — doesn't this school train self-awareness?), but I simply don't know if that's true. It sounds like it could be, and knowing me, it even sounds likely.

But I think that most of the answer lies in the fact that I think of this writing as a memoir. Why do people write their memoirs? I've heard that the reason to write memoirs is to try to express, through the retelling of one's own life, the truths about life — the real truths, the ones that make us sit up and take notice, the ones that make us laugh and cry. Fiction is also partially for this purpose, I believe; it helps express the truths about life by way of creating a new narrative. The advantages of memoirs are that one can at least hope that the events truly happened, which perhaps lends the writing an extra sort of punch — and furthermore, the actual experience of the writer may give the writing a more intimate sense of the passions and experiences of those who populate the memoir.

So at this point, that's my official answer: I wrote (and am still writing) Shataina's story by the same impulse as a memoirist. I can only hope that, through this, I will be able to express a tiny amount of living truth.
Works Cited in the Introduction

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