

You Can't Do That In RPGs

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Chapter 1: The Hero's Rude Awakening

Tygar¹ overslept.² Of course, Tygar normally overslept, but that's not the point. He overslept today, and today, of all days, would be the first day of his grand adventure. An adventure that will span worlds – well, okay, not worlds. Continents. Maybe. Actually, just a bunch of differently themed regions in a relatively small part of the world.³ In any case –

“Ermph. Keep it down. Trying to slee...”

Sadly, Tygar isn't even referring to me. The unknown antecedent of Tygar's half-mumbled protestation comes in the form of his older, wiser, and much abler-to-wake-up-on-time sister.⁴

“Tygar, you have a visitor – some guy who looks like a grumpy old man, but is probably a powerful and wizened wizard who will serve as your mentor for this adventure.”⁵

“Don't wanna... don't care...” is the somnolent response.⁶

Just then, the peaceful morning of this remote hamlet⁷ is shattered by a horrendous explosion. Luckily, it was just the visitor blowing up the door to make his grand entrance and not the destruction of the entire village.⁸

“Come forth from fatal loins, dear boy!”⁹

¹ Hello, and welcome to the footnotes section. You've obviously lost your way, or else you would be continuing with the actual story. But since you're here, I might as well explain a few things in a vague and mysterious manner. This is the footnotes section – no, wait. Much too definite. This might possibly be the one and only footnotes section as foretold by legend. But you're gonna have to go into the Ant-Eater Mound of Trials and bring me back a shrubbery to find out for sure.

In any case, this possible footnotes section exists so that I – your esteemed narrator – may wax editorially on various points contained wherein the story proper.

This footnote has nothing to do with Tygar's appellation despite its placement.

² Naturally the very first rule that teenaged heroes must follow. But no one ever asks if they're just lazy and incompetent fools who have never had a real job – no, it's simply a rueful smile at the vagrancies of youth. See Justin of Grandia and Jack of Radiata Stories.

³ Ever notice that RPGs either seem global or shoved into a very small part of the world? If they're global, each land will have a different characteristic, because continents are routinely influenced by one overwhelming element. If they're local, do note that geography is never a concern when placing opposing climates directly next to each other.

⁴ Tygar's sister is not yet important enough to warrant an appellation. Maybe after she gets kidnapped. Oops. Forget I said that.

⁵ The tried and true mysterious stranger who knows more than he lets on. This is also a contrived plot device so that Tygar will have someone to talk to. Besides me.

⁶ Here Tygar exhibits one of the many archetypal hero characteristics: disinterred surliness in anything but himself. Fortunately for us, Tygar is schizophrenic and will not be intolerably reticent throughout the story.

⁷ What self-respecting hero is from the big city? City slickers are too cynical to make good heroes. Besides, the hero is gonna have to have somewhere to single-handedly invade/slaughter the defenders. If he were to do that to some small burgh, he might be the villain not the hero. Pun on hamlet in a second.

⁸ While slaughtering the main character's village might be fun and a fairly normal beginning to hero-dom, I'm actually going to not punish the hero that way. No, I'll think of better ways. That involve figs. And mice.

I just realized that I can't footnote a footnote. Sigh. Oh well, figs and mice = see Robert Jordan.

⁹ Sadly, I shouldn't have to footnote this. It's Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet. Now do you get the above pun?

“Loins? He’s 17.¹⁰ Are you off your rocker, old man? And do you plan on paying for the door you just blasted?”¹¹

“Oh, erm, yes. I see. That was the bit from the prophecy about his birth.¹² You know, ‘save the world and all that jazz.’ Huh, I seem to be a little late... let me check... ah yes, here we are!”

But, just as he pulls out a piece of paper with what appear to be scribblings¹³ of cute, gentle monkeys in their death throes¹⁴ after having been dashed upon the rocks as one would puppies,¹⁵ the old man is interrupted.

“You’re batty! There’s too many jazz musicians¹⁶ in the world as it is!” notes¹⁷ the indignant sister.

“Ah, geez. Guy can’t get his beauty¹⁸ sleep around here. What is it that you want, old man?”¹⁹ asks Tygar.

“What I want? What I really really want?²⁰ What I want is for you – to die!”²¹

The silence following this pronouncement could have been seen as a dramatic pause,²² but soon the gentle snores of Tygar ruined the moment.

¹⁰ Yeah, he’s just 17. Heroes who can legally own land or smoke mystical herbs are virtually unheard of. Don’t worry though – give him a few months, and he’ll be the most powerful person/being on the planet.

¹¹ The old man has no intention of paying for the door. It’s a well known fact that the hero et al don’t have to pay for any damages rendered anywhere. What makes them different from a band of vandalistic bandits is their “heart” at the vanguard of any destruction. If you don’t get that last sentence, stop reading and go reacquaint yourself with the PS1 RPG library.

¹² Heroes often have prophecies – either about them or that they will fulfill. And prophecies always come true, unbeliever. Especially if the hero is named Thomas and makes a covenant.

Sigh. Footnote squared = Stephen R. Donaldson.

¹³ No ancient civilization uses English. Don’t worry though – if the hero doesn’t have the mysterious power to translate due to his ancient bloodline, he’ll soon come across some random linguist with a classics degree. Luckily this classicist isn’t interested in money – despite not being able to find work at all – he’ll instead be quite happy with whatever random artifacts the hero doesn’t need. In our story though, this old man serves the purpose well enough.

Oh. The above statements are in no way a reflection of the narrator’s bitterness about his classics degree.

¹⁴ The narrator is occasionally bewildered as to how RPGs determine which animals are cute, fluffy potential mascots and which animals are dangerous, mutated vermin that should be exterminated for easy experience points. Please don’t call PETA. No monkeys were harmed in the writing of this satire.

¹⁵ And before you go ballistic, go read Homer, you uncultured louts. Specifically, his section about Polyphemus.

Yes. The narrator did just call you an uncultured lout. His classics degree enables him to feel hubristic arrogance in attempt to give meaning to his otherwise pathetic existence.

¹⁶ But there are no jazz musicians. In fact, the music either tends to be bardic voiced melodies of a decidedly Celtic flavor or hard-rock with plenty of guitar solos. No choices, Mercedes Lackey.

¹⁷ It’s gonna be a punny day.

¹⁸ And the bishy guys do need that beauty sleep.

¹⁹ From the teenage view, anything above mid 20s is simply decrepit. And the sulky hero doesn’t show respect to his elders. But that’s ok, cause this old man is gonna... oh, ho, ho – thought I was gonna give away plot points, did ya? This isn’t some cheesy RPG full of “go fetch the five doom fragments, each buried within an elemental region, to prevent the ancient evil’s awakening”... Oh wait. Ah, crap.

²⁰ Yeah. I did just go there.

²¹ Wouldn’t it be refreshing to get a plot twist like this? Instead of waiting till the very end to betray the hero, he actually just does it from the beginning?

²² Complete with wooshing wind noise and birds flying overhead.

After sighing, the old man picked Tygar up by telekinesis²³ and hurled him outside through the blasted remains of the front door.²⁴

“Tigger!²⁵ Today is the first day of your adventure; the first day of the rest of your life.²⁶ Now listen carefully: the earth is doomed,²⁷ and you need – HEY.”

At that very moment, Tygar was busy examining his father’s sword²⁸ with comments like “ooh” and “shinnny.” A psionic blast²⁹ whizzing past his ear brought his attention back to the old man who was now visibly seething.³⁰

“Alright. We’ll do this the simple way. You will go to the ruins³¹ just outside of town,³² wipe out all the level one monsters, kill the boss,³³ and bring back the Sacred Booty.³⁴ Understood?”

“Ok, sure, sounds like fun.³⁵ When do we leave?” asks Tygar.

“We? We are not going anywhere. You are going.”

“So you’re not coming?”

“Nope. I have plans to get my old butt over to the inn,³⁶ have a drink,³⁷ and chat up the local barmaids.”³⁸

“If you’re not coming, why do I have to go?”³⁹

“Because you are the hero. The prophecies have foretold your role in the coming battle. They have foretold your unique heritage. They have foretold that you will be the single reason that we all live past the apocalypse.”

“What does that have to do with me going to the ruins outside of town?” asks Tygar snidely.

²³ And you thought the old man would be a mage. Ha. He’s a Y-Man! Goes to the local YMCA everyday.

²⁴ Some heroes are just unlucky schmucks who get beat-up on before becoming all-powerful beings able to crush even gods. See Jack of Radiata Stories and Llyod of Tales of Symphonia.

²⁵ Referencing real-life material well outside the game’s canon does not in anyway break continuity or immersiveness. Soon, the narrator will begin seeking product placements for this most holy adventure. Contact through the usual means: smoke signals and naked virgins.

²⁶ Now that’s good dialogue.

²⁷ Everybody loves Giles.

²⁸ No, not just *any* sword. His father’s sword. Think it’ll be important in saving the world?

²⁹ The narrator casts Resurrection on the Wizardry series.

³⁰ Not to be confused with the old man’s routine of teething, during which he takes out his dentures and proceeds to do a chilling ventriloquist impersonation of an undead warrior.

³¹ Scan back up a few lines to catch the delayed pun. Now, groan.

³² Isn’t it convenient that a starter dungeon is always close to the hero’s hometown? And it’s just great that this unblooded boy can wipe out the monsters/retrieve the lost artifact when no one else locally could be bothered.

³³ When’s the last time a hero wandered into a dungeon that didn’t have a boss?

³⁴ You know it’s important when it’s added to the valuables section of the inventory, and the game won’t let you sell it.

³⁵ Ah, how quickly his personality shifts. Note the boundless enthusiasm of the young hero, unbent by the trials to come.

³⁶ Luckily, all towns have inns. And unlike the Bible, there’s always room at the inn.

³⁷ Probably non-alcoholic. It just doesn’t do for RPG heroes to wander around drinking, getting drunk, and then pissing in the streets. Since this is a US release, the old man’s gonna have to settle for some unnamed, ambiguous drink of dubious origins.

³⁸ Not that he’s gonna get anywhere. You can’t have sex in RPGs. Why? Well, it’s a well known fact that only nerds like classicists – ahem, I mean socially challenged individuals – play RPGs, and nerds never get laid. No sense in taunting the hoi polloi with that which they cannot achieve.

³⁹ Tygar rightly questions why powerful/ancient mentors are always sending people on quests and never actually doing anything themselves.

“You, Tygar, must prove your worth to me. Only by bringing back the Sacred Booty will you prove that you are indeed the hero foretold.”

“Hang on there, Mr. Wizard⁴⁰. You just told me that I’m the hero. Is that or is that not going to happen regardless of whether I go on your silly little fetch⁴¹ quest? And you – why do you get to sit here on your laurels? Logically, if I’m going to be the hero, come what may, then it makes no difference if you come or not. In the interest of efficiency, I think you should come and lightning fry⁴² all the monsters – saving me the trouble of slogging through them.”

“Do not take me for some conjuror of cheap tricks!”⁴³ bellows the old man. “I am Gandalf, the Grey...⁴⁴ Erm. I mean, I am Wyznbach. I am the sum total of all that is RPG. I hold within me keys to unlock the greatest...”

As the local barmaid,⁴⁵ showing huge - tracts of land,⁴⁶ sauntered by, the old man trailed⁴⁷ off and then began to woodenly⁴⁸ trail⁴⁹ her on her trail⁵⁰ to the inn.

“Very well, Wyznbach. I will travail⁵¹ myself in this quest. Just see that she isn’t travailing⁵² because you got some booty.⁵³ In any case, it shouldn’t take nine months to get this Sacred Booty or whatever.”

With that fateful muttering, Tygar left his village in search of ruins, Sacred Booty, and all things hero-related.

Tune in next time to see if Tygar will fight to death for a woman he just met!⁵⁴

⁴⁰ Children of the 80s TV world never say die, goonie!

⁴¹ Fetch, Tygar, fetch. Good boy.

⁴² Yes, lightning fry. NOT fry with lightning. And NO, I’m NOT going to change it.

⁴³ If you had to look at the footnote, then bang your head against the desk until there’s a lordly ringing sound.

⁴⁴ At this point, the narrator’s legal advisors cut in and mumble something about copyright infringement. The narrator sullenly agrees but makes plans to have the advisors sacked by llamas. Sadly, all llamas are currently employed by a mountain snake.

⁴⁵ You can take her as a conjuror of cheap tricks, if you like.

⁴⁶ Actually, she’s probably not since this has been censored for the US. But who can resist referencing Monty Python? If you say, “anyone with good taste and decency,” then I shall be forced to sick the llamas on you.

⁴⁷ ONE.

⁴⁸ You have a sick mind. Yes, you. You’re the one who looked at the footnote.

⁴⁹ TWO.

⁵⁰ THREE.

⁵¹ FOUR.

⁵² FIVE. As a public service announcement, this should serve as a warning. Punning is a disease. A very serious disease. Once infected, a person’s inflected sentence structure will be sentenced to the foul bowels of disaster. Friends don’t let friends pun.

⁵³ Come on. You knew I was gonna make a pun. Have a little faith.

⁵⁴ Now taking bets that he does. 5 to 1, suckers – I mean, customers. Good, gentle customers.

Chapter 2: In Search of Sacred Booty

As Tygar walked out of the village, he felt a sudden and strange sensation, almost as if he were⁵⁵ viewing the world from a completely different angle – a sharply elevated viewpoint giving a bird’s eye perspective.⁵⁶ After shrugging this odd moment off with an even-keeled, yet lofty attitude, he squared his shoulders and continued on, making a beeline for the ruins.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, this journey was ruined when a gigantic, mutated bee crossed his line.⁵⁸ Naturally,⁵⁹ Tygar was perplexed by this engagement: where do gigantic, mutated bees come from?⁶⁰ Surely there were⁶¹ gigantic, mutated flowers? And natural predators?⁶² And an ecosystem to support them?⁶³

But Tygar only had the brief time during which the view zoomed back on him⁶⁴ to ponder this; soon he was engaged in a level one⁶⁵ fight to the death!⁶⁶

Drawing his sword, Tygar yelled his one battlecry: “I am a slayer of Gods!”⁶⁷ He ran forward and sliced the gigantic, mutated bee in half!⁶⁸

Or, at least, he thought he did.⁶⁹ As he sprang backward, he stared in shock as red numbers⁷⁰ flew up from the bee. It might have been the shock⁷¹ that caused him to forget

⁵⁵ Subjunctive, contrary to fact. Fool.

⁵⁶ Tygar is, of course, not having an out-of-body experience – no matter how cool that would be. It is I, your esteemed narrator, who is now floating somewhere in the lower troposphere, looking down upon the super-deformed body of Tygar. Not to worry, the deformity is quite natural and painless; indeed, he shall be restored the moment a random battle commences. None of this breaks immersive continuity. Not at all.

⁵⁷ Sentences such as this bring a tear to the eye. I have tears of joy. Yours are probably of a different sort. In any case: off-on, odd-even, lofty in comparison to the previous statement, shrugging to squaring.

⁵⁸ Getting more mileage out of the last sentence by punning ruin and the beeline. “Brilliant” you say? Why, thank you.

⁵⁹ Tygar’s a naturalist.

⁶⁰ A question that all gigantic, mutated bee parents dread. Also note the small nod to the fencers.

⁶¹ And the grammarian gains a IUP on the uncultured lout. Of course, the grammarian is probably wincing at my complete free-license usage of tenses. It will have been getting worse.

⁶² Natural predators, mind you. Aliens don’t count. Despite their help with the whole pyramids thing.

⁶³ As Brian Clevinger well points out, there is never a reasonable ecosystem to support all these weird monsters. Considering the tree-hugging tendency of many RPGs, this is a tad odd.

⁶⁴ Yeah, battle transitions are always subtle and never break immersiveness.

⁶⁵ Much convenient that the beginner area just happens to be filled with low level scum. Wouldn’t it be so much more interesting if a few level twenty mobs ran around the area. No really – they beat the crap out of Tygar and then steal his wallet. I think beating the crap out of the hero will be fun. Er, would be fun.

⁶⁶ Or to the continue screen. Or to the priest/temple/god/tree cheap-o resurrection with no penalty screen. Where’s the hardcore? Yeah, besides *Fire Emblem*. Grant me a battle that makes me actually sweat in fear, and you’ve got a winner on your hands. Or at least the mangled corpse of a loser. Either way.

⁶⁷ Not only do I poke fun the repetitive battlecries of characters, I manage to: give a shout out to a fellow RPGamer staff member, offend religious fundamentalists, and make Tygar sound like a pompous numbnut. Not bad for six words.

⁶⁸ Or so he thought. You see, cleaving a six foot sword through an enemy does not actually split them in half. No, it just knocks off some hit points. Ditto: arrows through the throat, freezing spells, chakras, hadokens, or any other pseudo-medieval fantasy weapon/spell.

⁶⁹ See, the narrator is all knowing. Omniscient third person. None of that crappy first person or limited third. Who likes limited editions anyway? Elitist collectors and eBay scallywags.

⁷⁰ Yay for numbers. Especially red ones. And twos.

that he was holding a giant sword⁷² and attempt to defend himself when the bee attacked.⁷³

The bee, in typical bee fashion,⁷⁴ drove its pointy⁷⁵ stinger into Tygar's soft flesh. Tygar, not being swift,⁷⁶ expected to see a massive puncture wound in his left thigh⁷⁷ but was somewhat relieved⁷⁸ that all he lost were some numbers.⁷⁹ Relieved or not, he attacked with a vengeance⁸⁰ and slew the fell beast on his next attack.⁸¹

The steaming corpse fell⁸² and disappeared⁸³ with a soft puff.⁸⁴ While vaguely disappointed that he could not scream his glory over the cadaver, Tygar was greatly delighted at what happened next. A rusted hauberk, a half-cuirass,⁸⁵ a healing potion, ten Smurfs,⁸⁶ and several gold coins popped out from the rapidly vanishing body.⁸⁷ Not caring to question the matter, Tygar conveniently blamed it on a rift in the space-time continuum⁸⁸ and plundered the loot.⁸⁹

⁷¹ You readers are saved from a pun involving electricity being cast by the bee. I felt it entirely nonsensical that random animals can cast high level magic. Good thing no bunnies ever figured out how to spell NUKE. Anyanka would have been right.

⁷² Side note: I once had a giant s-word. Much of my childhood was spent running around screaming this giant s-word at the top of my lungs. Then, one day, the heavens answered my cries. I now no longer shout my giant s-word. True story.

⁷³ Attack or defend? Pick one or the other, cause you're an incompetent moron incapable of doing both.

⁷⁴ Stripes, makes them look thin. Which does bring up the question: how do these giant, mutated creatures manage to survive when they're not munching on heroes? I mean sure, your average barbarian can provide months of foodstuffs... barbarianicles, barbarian ala mode, roasted bits o barbarian, fillet barbarion... but really, surely these creatures have other things to kill? Why don't we get to kill those things?

⁷⁵ As opposed to its dull stinger. Redundancy is a beautiful thing. I especially like sharp swords. Not sharp s-words, mind you.

⁷⁶ Not enough agility points. OH!

⁷⁷ Realistic damage? In video games? Only the bushido masters at Squaresoft would attempt such a thing.

⁷⁸ There will come a day when there will be no relief for Tygar. That's what we master wordsmiths like to call "foreshadowing." That's right: shadows do play golf. What do you think Link's shadow was doing all that time that Link was scampering around Hyrule? Zelda's shadow? Yeah. I went too far. Sue me.

⁷⁹ He still has his lucky number 6,227,020,800. We'll see if the Wonderslime can tackle that one.

⁸⁰ I've always thought this an odd phrase. What other kind of attacking is there? Apologetic attacking? Polite attacking? Pauly Shore attacking?

⁸¹ Hurray for easy-to-defeat level one monsters.

⁸² It should have been obvious by now.

⁸³ And that just stinks. Or maybe it prevents stench. In any case (vocative is preferred), where are all the corpses? The rotting, decayed destruction wrought by the hero and his fellow do-gooders? Blast it all, I'm a video gamer, ergo I'm a violent @%\$! (just ask Jack Thompson), and I wanna see bodies. Lots of bodies.

⁸⁴ Interpret this however you like, magic dragon.

⁸⁵ Beavis would laugh. That's about the sophistication of your average video gamer (just ask anyone over the age 40).

⁸⁶ Goes into the valuables section of the inventory. Remember that.

⁸⁷ Yep. All the stuff that you'd expect a gigantic, mutated bee to be carrying. Somewhere. Maybe in a pouch. Maybe in a magical vortex. Definitely not in latex.

⁸⁸ *Dues from the gods*. The narrator does hate footnoting the footnotes, but in this case he feels that he must mention that this is a clever (his opinion) play on a Latin phrase for a common plot device. Clear?

⁸⁹ It never occurred to Tygar that the gigantic, mutated bee might have a gigantic, mutated bee-wife or gigantic, mutated bee-drones in desperate need of those Smurfs. Even if he had, he would have been wrong; the gigantic, mutated bee was actually in a very kinky relationship with someone called the Queen.

Strapping the gear on, he continued down the path. At the entrance to the ruins, he spied⁹⁰ a lovely young woman⁹¹ being attacked by bandits. Drawing his sword,⁹² he held it aloft and shouted “by the power of the gray skulls”⁹³ and ran down the hill.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ And took some pictures.

⁹¹ Enter, lust-interest and general object of fanservice.

⁹² But not with an etch-a-sketch. And never in pastel, all you deviant artists.

⁹³ Yeah, I lied about the whole one battlecry thing. Sue me. And if you don't get the TV show reference, then you really ought to spend more time indoors, becoming nerdier.

⁹⁴ Oooh. A cliff-hanger. Think Tygar will fight to the death for a woman whom he hasn't even ogled properly? Tune in next time to find out. Yeah, I said you'd find out this time. I lied. Sue me again.