

## The Worlds Inside R.A. Salvatore

By Jeffrey Fleming

Fantasy author R.A. Salvatore is best known for creating Drizzt Do'Urden, the star of a series of books set in the Forgotten Realms setting of the Dungeons & Dragons franchise. He is, however, a longtime gamer -- both pen and paper and MMO. In 2008, baseball player Curt Schilling, an avid MMO fan and lover of Salvatore's books, recruited him to help found a company.



Now, Salvatore is one of the key creative figures at 38 Studios. Along with *EverQuest* and *Elder Scrolls* veterans, Salvatore is working on an MMO code-named *Copernicus* that promises to deliver an ambitious and densely realized fantasy world.

And now that 38 Studios has acquired Big Huge Games, the *Copernicus* setting will also be home to a single-player game code-named *Mercury*, to be helmed by *Elder Scrolls* designer Ken Rolston.

Gamasutra recently sat down with Salvatore to find out what goes into the creation of believable, emotionally resonant fantasy worlds.

**So, what is your role on the *Copernicus* and *Mercury* projects? Are you world-building? Are you getting down into the nitty-gritty of actually writing the script?**

R. A. Salvatore: At this point I'm world-building. When I came in, I took the basic idea that Curt and his gang wanted to do an MMO, and I turned it into an MMO for them. I created a very detailed history of the world and created all the different regions with a team.

And then of course we hired in a bunch of people: Steve Danuser (*EverQuest II*), Ryan Shwayder (*EverQuest II*), and Mike Woods were the first three to come. And we built this world, race by race, and made everything make sense in the world.

My actual title was Creator of Worlds, which I thought was pretty cool. I was a COW. So, when Big Huge Games came along, my job, along with some of the other guys, was to show them what we were doing and give them a ton of information. Then Ken Rolston (*The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*) and Mark Nelson (*The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*) created a story that would fit within that world.



I went down and worked with them a little bit on the story but my job, right now, more than anything else, is making sure the world smells the same no matter which part of the world you're in, whether you're talking about the art, the music, whatever.

When they show me what they're doing, I always say, "Does this fit? Where does this fit? How does this fit?" Right now, I'm like a kind of den mother to all these creative people more than anything else.

**With *Project Mercury*, it's a big get to have Ken Rolston on board.**

RS: Yeah, isn't he great? I love Ken.

**Game writing seems like a difficult thing to separate out from game design. I'm wondering what the back and forth is between you two when it comes to designing the game.**

RS: Really my job is to make sure that the story, particularly the metastory, which is where they were when I was down there, fits into our world. So, Steve Danuser and I met with Mark and Ken, and then my job was to relate to them my feelings about the world. The guys from 38 Studios are actually closer to the particulars of the story than I am now because they're working on it every day.

**Is the idea to spread the material out across a whole bunch of different titles?**

RS: I don't know. I know that they're talking about it. It's a big IP and that's the whole point of it.

**Do you see yourself writing novels set in that world?**

RS: We've talked about it. I don't know whether it's going to happen or not. It's certainly a big world.

**A lot of your work has been tied into the *Forgotten Realms* setting that Ed Greenwood originally created. Is this an opportunity for you to take on a similar position?**

RS: Exactly. And I've done it before. I did it with my *DemonWars* books, but this was even bigger because there were so

many other people that got involved right away. So, yeah, this is, along with DemonWars, my second attempt at really building my own world. I'm kind of the Ed Greenwood, I guess, of *Copernicus*.

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**What are some of the things that designers need to keep in mind when they're creating worlds to set their games in?**

RS: Whether it's writing a book or creating world for a game, the most important thing you're asking people for is their suspension of disbelief. That's the critical thing. You're all going to come up with different sweet spots that you want to work on in a world with a different tone.

And I think the key is really consistency. It's making the music fit the art, and the art fit the story, and the story fit the races, and the races fit the whole tone of the world.

The more consistency you have, the less you're going to be throwing people out of the world. The more they're immersed in it, the more they're gonna care about it. The more they care about it, you win. Whether it's a book or a game.

**Does some of the world-building come out of role-playing sessions?**

RS: No. Well, it might as we go along because they're playing what they're doing. They might come up with other things. But no.

**To what extent does gaming influence the design or even your own writing?**

RS: Probably different for everybody. You might see something in any game that reminds you of a game previous, if that game had a big influence on the person who was designing the game. For me, no, not a lot at all.

I have been a gamer since -- well, all my life -- but I really got into role-playing games with D&D around 1980. But I've been very good at keeping the games and the writing separate in my head. I might steal something from a session if somebody has a cool idea or a cool name for a character. Mike Leger (38 Studios) actually came up with the name Jarlaxle, who is one of the long-standing characters in my series. But other than that, no.

**Are there any cultural or historical references that you find yourself going back to when you're creating these worlds?**

RS: Yeah. Perfect example: After I wrote the first three books for TSR -- and I did the Crystal Shard, Streams of Silver, and Halfling's Gem -- they wanted me to go back and talk about where this Dark Elf character came from.

And so they wanted me to create this Dark Elf city. And that was quite a challenge because Dark Elves at that point were just these things in dungeons you run away from and I had to make a workable society out of that. So I actually went and got out my copy of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. That was actually the skeleton of the world I created.

Because I don't care whether you're writing about elves or dwarves; it has to make sense. And to make sense to people who are reading your books or playing your games -- they're not elves or halflings; they're people -- they have to have seen it in their experience. We all have an idea of how societies work, how civilizations work, whether it's a civilization like the Romans or Native American tribes.

We all have these images of how they work, and there are a lot of truths that we come to expect, things we take for granted. So, you want to draw on that. The races have to make sense within themselves. If the Dark Elves were just these killing machines, they wouldn't have a society. They wouldn't be powerful. They would all be dead.

Even when I wrote the orcs in the more recent books, I tried to do the same thing. There has to be some structure behind it. It can't just be pure evil people. People don't get up in the morning and say, "I'm gonna be evil today." So, for that, I used Mario Puzo.

The biggest influence on my DemonWars world was the Catholic Church. I'm a Catholic kid from New England. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church, the schism of the church over money, the Franciscans, the Benedictines, that whole thing really resonated with me philosophically. So, when I was doing DemonWars, that was one of the structures I employed, except it was based on magic instead of money. I always go back to history.

When I was in college, I took a course called *The Ascent of Man*. It was based on the Jacob Bronowski documentary series that was on in the '70s. You know, one of those 13-part series on PBS, right? And what Bronowski did that I found really intriguing is he traced the history of man by inventions as opposed to by wars.

If you look at history, it's always about wars, right? We're going to pick the Civil War for these three months of American History. It's always about wars. Bronowski did it by inventions, and he talked about how these things changed society. So, when I was doing the history of *Copernicus*, that was one of the pieces that I used. In fact, I brought in my discs, and people would watch *The Ascent of Man*.

And then the other thing that I use a lot is a Time-Life series called *The Enchanted World*. It's a book series that I've gone back to a thousand times. If you read the book about giants, it shows you all the different giants, all the different fairy tales and myths of giants from all over Europe mostly, even the Far East sometimes. So, it really brings a flavor into it. You can understand how these myths formed, how folklore came to be. It's kind of fun to imagine what these people saw to make them think the elves took their babies to hollow hills or whatever.

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**Have you ever read Michael Swanwick? He wrote an essay called "In the Tradition..." that described what he called "Hard Fantasy," which was a type of fantasy similar to the slide rule style of hard science fiction where everything has an objective, mechanical reason for happening. Do the fantasy worlds you create follow an internally consistent mechanical process?**

RS: Yes. Absolutely. But I don't explain to the nth degree. There has to be that element that can't be explained; that's why it's magic. To me, that's a very alluring part of fantasy because there's something very comforting about living in a world where not everything can be explained by science, right? It kind of gives you hope for something after, you know what I mean? But there has to be a consistency to it.

In DemonWars, I use gemstones and minerals. These things, they're in a ring above the planet, and somebody figured out how to get them by accident. This became the business for the Church because they thought these were the gifts from God.

A big part of my research in DemonWars was looking up the old superstitious magical values and properties of gemstones, and the practical manufacturing qualities of them. Serpentine for heat shields, things like that.

So, I did all of that to try and make it somewhat consistent, either through myth or what we know. There has to be a basis because otherwise what you run into is *deus ex machina*, right?

Then you wind up with, "Here comes the dragon! You found a new spell. Boom. Shot the dragon dead." There has to be some logic, and there have to be parameters to magic as well.

This is why I drive Wizards of the Coast crazy, especially in Forgotten Realms, because I won't do anything with the gods. The gods are very prominent on the Realms but I don't want anything to do with that. I've even had the Dark Elves say, "I don't know if it's a real god, but I follow it. I just know this is what's in my heart, and they gave her this name."

But other people are writing Forgotten Realms books and the gods are showing up and doing things. So, when they did the War of the Spider Queen books, which dealt with the pantheon for the Dark Elves, I didn't write any.

I worked as an editor on the series and a consultant and worked with the other authors. It's just nothing I do. It's not the way I work. Very rarely do you see the gods walking the world of DemonWars. And I never even answer the question. "Are those gem stones the gifts of God or is it just a scientific metaphysical glitch?"

**So, you just kind of work around it? It hasn't bothered you that you're constrained by the game setting and rules that everyone knows?**

RS: No. It really hasn't, because the truth is when I'm writing books, I'm writing about characters more than anything else. Many years ago, when I got my first rejection letter back in '83 or '84, I called Robert Cormier, who's from my hometown. He did *The Chocolate War* and *I Am The Cheese*. He's probably one of the most important young adult authors of the 20th century, if not the most.

He was incredibly accessible, so I called him and he kept me on the phone for hours. The one thing he told me that stayed with me forever was character is more important than story. If you have a great character in a mediocre story, you'll still have a great book. If you have a mediocre character in a great story, meh. And he just drummed that into me and I followed it ever since.

**So, what are some of the techniques that you use to create your characters? Do you look at people in your life for inspiration?**

RS: I would say most of my characters are at first, as a broad brush, they're composites of people I know. Every now and then I get someone who's very much based on a character. Mike Laveger for Cadderly. [laughs] Gary Leger in *The Woods Out Back* was me.

That was autobiographical, except I was kidnapped by a hobbit and he was kidnapped by a leprechaun. Same thing. But it's mostly a broad brush composite. But the way I look at characters is I get to know them while I'm writing them. They tell me who they are. It just kind of happens that way -- it's very strange.

**Robert E. Howard talked about Conan as being a composite of various oil field bullies, bootleggers, and other people on the margins of society that he knew in Depression-era Texas.**

RS: Sure. Sure. And you know, to me, if you want me to say where did Drizzt come from, I think I probably get him from 93 different places, whether it's Fritz Leiber's Mouser, to characters I've seen on TV, to who I wish I had the courage to be. It's all those things.



**I heard that you had written some dialogue for *Quake III Arena*. Do you see yourself getting involved in the writing of dialogue for *Copernicus*?**

RS: [laughs] My gaming group did the bot responses. A thousand different insults, we had to come up with. Well, fortunately, one of my friends worked at a prison. We had to throw out most of his, but some of them were pretty good. Yeah, that was a trip. That was a lot of fun until we got around to number 487, and then we were like, "Oh god."

But do I see myself doing that with this game? Probably not. Maybe if there's something that really, really tickles me like doing a zone or something. I don't know.

**Will there be other writers that will be answering to you?**

RS: There are. [laughs] By answering to me, what that means is I'm a pretty easy editor in that as long as you get the flavor, I don't want you to be a carbon copy of me. When I did *War of the Spider Queen*, I felt that way. You know, you don't hire creative people and not let them be creative. There's no point to that. That's why they call it "the talent". You let them be talented.

