

On Writing...
Spartans: The AWOL Squad
Part 1

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Conception	2
The Setting	2
The Initial Characters.....	2
The Plot: A Brief Overview of Early Episodes	3
Expanding the Idea & Cast	3
An Example of How Setting Can Influence Minor Plot Points	5

Introduction

The *On Writing...* series is all about us, the authors, talking about our writing processes in regards to certain stories. You might learn something that you can apply to your on writing, might gain some inspiration, or might just like knowing what all goes into making the final product you read.

Some of you may wonder why I would bother doing a piece like this on fan-fiction. Thing is, whenever you play in an established universe – whether its someone else's or your own, whether you own the copyright or not – the same principles apply. Working with an established universe means that you have to work within a certain set of parameters. What those boundaries are, how many of them they are, and how much than can be changed depends on you, the kind of story you're telling, and how many liberties you're allowed if you have permissions to play in someone else's sandbox.

Fan-fiction is an awesome and grossly under-rated educational tool. Don't let anyone tell you different.

I write episodic scripts that take place in the Halo universe. I don't have permission for it, which is why it's fan-fiction and will never be sold. This was my first real venture into science fiction and I needed to see what worked, how it worked, why it worked, and what didn't work. Things could get technical, with the technology, military protocol, and making things believable for the readers. So I had to learn, and while I was learning, I figured that I might as well have fun. This is why I chose to use everything presented in the Halo games and books as the foundation for the series. That allowed me to get a feel for all things I wasn't sure of while getting a handle on humorous sci-fi.

Now step into my office for a bit and let me walk you through the first part of how I write *Spartans: The AWOL Squad*.

Conception

The series was conceived during a moment of tedium at the day job, while I was going through one my “kicks” on Halo. I like military sci-fi, quirky characters, and puzzling storylines. With *Spartans*, I had all of that.

The Setting

I cheated. I stole a page from the makers of Red vs. Blue and decided to use the Halo multiplayer maps as my sets. Why not use something that’s already suited for the job?

I started out in Halo 2, with the notion of progressing to Halo 3. I made the maps into various sectors of the Halo rings, ones that my characters would travel through on their journey.

The Initial Characters

Then came the cast. I wanted odd-ball characters, misfits, people who had been conscripted for a program that none of them could get out of, even though most of them would have been discharged from the standard military long before this. I gave them all at least one exaggerated trait that made them unique:

1. Shadow is obsessed with his kill score.
2. Aquarius has a thing for her horoscope.
3. Avon is the girliest Spartan around.
4. Undertaker is the straight guy who can’t seem make it with ladies though he’d like to.
5. Joyrider who drives like a maniac.

These are the five I started with. I gave them cursory personal backgrounds at first, more to flesh out their personalities and mannerisms than anything else.. While developing the story premise, I drew heavily from *The Fall of Reach* by Eric Nylund, matching the details of their training and experiences in the Spartan II program with those of Master Chief Spartan 117.

For those of you unfamiliar with all that, the Spartans were recruited in secret and under the legal radar. Six year old children were kidnapped from their parents, clones left in their place. That identity they had was stripped away. Though they retained their first names, they were more

often referred to by their numeric designations – numbers that drove home their status as subjects in a highly experimental military program whose goal was to forge the best weapons possible to use against a foe that was defeating humanity at every turn.

That program, the one that came before it, and the one that came after it are major factors in my overall plotline – which I'll get into in the next section.

Back to the cast.

Finally, I chose their armor colors based on what was available in the game and what might suit their roles and genders.

The Plot: A Brief Overview of Early Episodes

No, I'm not going to tell you what's going on with the current story arc. What I'd going to discuss here is the first few episodes of the series, how plotted them out, maybe some of the reasons I did things the way I did. That means it'll touch on a lot of adjacent areas, like characters and setting. While there are some things I'll skip over as they pertain to the ongoing storyline, I will address everything else.

****THE FOLLOWING CONTAINS SOME SPOILERS****

So if you haven't read them, shame on you. Stop reading this and go read the posted script first.

I decided to start my story during the onset of the Battle of Reach, the event that immediately precedes the *Halo: Combat Evolved* video game and is the impetus for the slip space jump (think warp speed from Star Trek or hyper-space from Star Wars) by the ship, *Pillar of Autumn*, that lands the hero in the vicinity of the first Halo ring. In the book by Eric Nylund, there was a call to battle for all UNSC (United Naval Space Command) ships to fight for Reach. If my heroes were anywhere near the planet of Reach, they would have answered the call.

But what if they didn't arrive? What if they crash landed on a Halo ring before Master Chief did?

Expanding the Idea & Cast

My Spartans crash-landed on a Halo ring while on their way to Reach. Given that a Spartan's orders are their priority, the first logical thing for them to do would be to look for an alternate method of getting to their destination. Thus the great quest for a ship began.

The ship is the goal for the squad in the first eight episodes. Their orders are their motivation. The Covenant, a conglomeration of several alien species seeking out ancient technology, is the enemy. That's canon and something that I saw no reason to change. Yet they weren't on the ring, they were at Reach. Or were they?

Every good plot needs conflict and/or bad guys. So I threw some in: an alien Shipmaster, his second-in-command, and a gaggle of goons. Since I was restricting myself to what was available in the games, the choice of alien species wasn't open to me. They were all Elites. Since I didn't think they'd be in the story very long, I made them into "anonymous" characters, gave them vague designations to separate them in the script. The exception was the Shipmaster who was given a name and a few personality quirks of his own. I plopped them on the Halo installation first, gave them the initial purpose of researching it, and then had them alter that to seek and destroy when they found out that Spartans were on the ring they'd discovered.

Then I asked myself: is this enough to keep things interesting? I didn't think so. I had to go back to the characters to help with that. I had five misfit Spartans – what if one had his own agenda, a set of commands to follow that was different from everyone else's? Was he even part of the squad at this point? What did the other Spartans know about him?

So I took Joyrider off the team, gave him his orders – which still have not been revealed so I won't describe them now – and decided to blame his exit from the squad on Shadow, the trigger-happy sniper with the score obsession. To illustrate the team leader's willingness to snipe anything, I explained that Joyrider had been shot by Shadow and was no longer a part of the squad. He would make appearances later, ghosting after the squad during their search for a ship. I gave Joyrider the non-holographic A.I. program, 8-Ball, simply because this was a Halo fan-fiction and what's Halo without Spartans and A.I.s? Also, given his secret set of commands, I thought that his possession of an A. I. unit was appropriate to the mission and circumstance.

Eventually, all the characters would come together, at once and at separate times. The aliens would be killed off, and the first of many hidden agendas – all of them just vague notions at the time – involving the Spartans would begin to surface.

Before I started writing *Episode 1: Out of Reach*, this was all I had. In fact, I didn't have much else, plot-wise, until *Episode 6: Getting It Right*. By that time, I worked out details of the one of the main plot threads centering around Joyrider and just what it was that he was up to. That agenda, which required him to *prevent* Shadow, Aquarius, Avon, and Undertaker from getting to Reach, gave me the opportunity to make the transition from Halo 2 to Halo 3 by having Joyrider trap his former squad-mates in cryostasis at the end of *Episode 8: Never Say Die*.

From there, I jumped forward seven years into the future with *Episode 9: Three's Company*, where I introduced three new additions to the regular cast. At that point I had developed 3 major hidden agendas, along with what would become the second story arc.

An Example of How Setting Can Influence Minor Plot Points

Before writing any episode, I pop *Halo 2* or *Halo 3* into the Xbox and take a tour of the maps I plan to use. I take notes of locations, equipment, topographical features. Then I plan the events, actions, decisions based on the story threads I had in mind and the features the map provided.

The first episode involved a crash but did I want to show the wreckage? I thought it more expedient to have the crash take place in the ocean, so that the first scene could be the Spartans wading up to the beach. I chose a map with a playable area that allowed your game characters to go waist-deep into the water. That map was Zanzibar.

Zanzibar is a large set. It has a beach, a large wall, a large spinning fan-like construct, a big main building housing generators, hallways, catwalks – lots of open and enclosed areas to work in. The wall between the beach and the main compound gave me the idea to have Shadow threaten his teammates with sniping. The size of the place had me including a check of the area for potential enemies, ships, or other vehicles. In the second episode, the ocean view gave me an excellent place for an introspective moment with the Shipmaster. *Episode 11: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, featured a return to the area using the Halo 3 version of the map, Last Resort. Again, the ocean view afforded me the perfect place for a private, somewhat cryptic exchange between two key characters. In *Episode 20: It's Not What You Think* is set on a map that actually features a ship – in a non-playable area. Its inaccessibility sparked several scenes concerning the characters' frustration at that, and their humorously violent response to it. That alone took portions in three scenes.

Setting in this series is such a major component, dictating to some extent what I can and cannot do within the confines of each map, that I simply cannot plot without it. It would be like trying to bake and decorate a cake without pan or sugar. Aside from the practical logistics, the setting itself gives me ideas for scenes and dialogue that wouldn't be featured otherwise.