



Writing as Game Time

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IN JULY 2018 I WAS APPROACHED to write a series of twelve stories for BBC Radio 4. At the time, I was working on a novel. I was invested in that novel, had a strong first draft, and was reluctant to leave it in favour of the commission; but I did. I knew as soon as I made that decision that I would have to take a pragmatic approach.

The commission got the green light in September and I took the rest of the month to shore up the novel-in-progress. In October I jumped onto *Stillicide*, the twelve-story project. The BBC wanted first drafts by January. This effectively meant writing a new story a week for three months.

The RLF post at Aberystwyth took up two days a week. I had a nine-month-old baby. I'd already committed to a significant amount of other writing and travel. The only way I could see to manage the work was to apply a plan and stick to it.

I found myself reaching for a sort of layman sport psychology. A combination of principles I'd applied playing sport myself, and the clichéd notions I'd inherited from watching it.

Tactics, I thought, would be all important.

I decided to dedicate only the three weekdays that remained after RLF duties to *Stillicide*. I would finish writing by 5 pm each day. If I had to miss a weekday, I'd swap it for a Saturday; but I would not get dragged into a state of solid work.



I also decided I would move to a new story each week, regardless what shape a piece was in. *Ultimately*, I coached myself, *I can make it better later*. The goal was to generate acceptable drafts of twelve stories by Christmas. Stay positive, and keep the work rate up.

I told myself to ‘trust the talent’. To acknowledge what I’d managed before. *Don’t let frustration get the better of you when things don’t strike home*.

This was the voice I used to hear in myself playing centre forward. *Take the shot. Don’t be afraid to miss. You’re committed, and diligent, and put in the effort. You generally put the ball in the net. Eventually, anyway*.

Writers don’t usually think like that. Not writer *me*, anyway.

In February I was offered a further commission, to deliver an online short-story course. Again, it meant a lot of work. Theoretically, this needed to happen alongside the radio commission. But, I told myself, stick to the plan. Write the stories first. When they are done, move on.

Previously I would work intensely and obsessively for compressed periods, isolating myself for days on end. But to navigate the two simultaneous commissions I stayed disciplined, and calm, and optimistic.

When I wrote badly, I dealt with it like a double fault, or a skewed penalty, or missed tackle.

When I felt overwhelmed, I reminded myself how many times I’d come through the pressure before.

When I sat down to write, it was with a clock ticking and a clear idea of what had to be achieved before the whistle went. And when the whistle went, I walked away. Perhaps I could do this because, for once, somebody else was holding the whistle.