The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2015

Edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman, Ph.D.

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Cover photo by Petter Karlsson, CC-BY-NC: In the larp *Just a Little Lovin'*, the rock band Urban Renaissance closed the drag/variety show every night with an energetic performance. Although Rain (right) died in Act II, the show went on in Act III.

Introduction to the Journalistic Section

Sarah Lynne Bowman

Welcome to a new year for the *Wyrd Con Companion Book* and another batch of fascinating articles. This year, the Journalistic Section features a diverse set of pieces about multiple facets of role-playing: documentation of Nordic, Russian, and American games; explorations of game systems, such as campaign larp economies and theatre-style design; examinations of play practices, including transgressing gender/sexuality norms; descriptions of supplemental works of art created from the perspective of a larp character; and analysis of the dynamics in larp communities. I hope you find the depth and plurality of these topics as interesting as I do.

Our first article is **Sarah Lynne Bowman**'s "Love, Sex, Death, and Liminality: Ritual in *Just a Little Lovin'*," a reprint of a piece I wrote for Nordiclarp.org analyzing the use of in- and out-of-game rituals in the 2015 Danish run of the Nordic larp *Just a Little Lovin'*. This larp explores desire, fear of death, and friendship during the beginning of the AIDS crisis. Many articles detail the fact that larp is a ritual process, but I wanted to apply this theory to a specific game in order to serve both an academic and documentation function. The structure of *Just a Little Lovin'* creates several larp-within-a-larp experiences that, in my view, deepen immersion and created profound emotional experiences for many of the players. This structure is intensified by the content of the larp, which deals with societal transgression, subcultures, intimacy, sexuality, and coming to terms with mortality in the face of tragedy. My hope is that this article will help to inform future documentation works that examine the use and impact of ritual space in larp.

For our next article, **Nat Budin**'s "Decoding the Default: Secrets and Powers Larp" explains the logic and benefits of theatre-style larps designed in the so-called "secrets and powers" genre. Interviewing several key figures in the Intercon larp scene, Budin describes the structure of this genre, which is often used to create one-shot larps with pre-written characters. A response to Katherine Castiello Jones' and Evan Torner's article from last year, which offered the parlor sandbox genre of larp design as an alternative, Budin explains why secrets and powers larps are compelling for players and, when designed correctly, can create reliably interesting play experiences. Finally, Budin provides a manifesto in defense of the genre, which he believes has become the default for many theatre-style larp experiences for good reasons.

Next, **Quinn D** explains her process of learning how to create art in order to faithfully portray a campaign larp character in "How I Became an Accidental Artist through Larp." While the author did not self-identify as an artist at the start of the long-term game, she learned how to create wire sculptures for both economic and emotional reasons over the course of the game in order to enact her artist character. These sculptures were cherished by her fellow players in- and out-of-game, leading to a transformative experience for Quinn, who was awakened into a new form of her own creative expression through the process. This article demonstrates that larp has the potential to unlock within players abilities and strengths thay they previously were not aware they possessed. Additionally, this article is a great example of documentation of ephemera: the lasting artifacts a game produces even after the temporary enactment of the larp is done.

Our next piece arises from Wyrd Con and *Companion Book* veteran **Rob McDiarmid**, who writes on "Writing Game Economies for Larp." This piece explores in great depth various economic theories, applying them to several types of campaign style larp games and explaining how certain mechanics facilitate specific economic outcomes. This article is an excellent addition to the literature, as an extensive examination of the economics of larp worlds is long overdue. Larp designers often spend countless hours attempting to balance their economic systems; this article offers an application of various economic principles to larp worlds, including supply, demand, sinks, and faucets. As an editor, I am deeply indebted to the contributions of *Dystopia Rising* organizer **Ryan Coogan** and *Planetfall* creator **Matthew Webb**, who offered extensive comments on an early draft of this article. While larp worlds are, on one level, "not real," the economic aspects of persistent games certainly impact both the players and the characters. We hope that this article will provide a jumping off point for designers attempting to create their own economic systems, refine the ones they have, or for players wishing to learn how to better navigate their in-game economies.

Shifting our focus to improving the health of role-playing groups, **Taylor Stokes'** contribution, "Cultivating Responsible Masculinity in Gaming Communities," offers advice for cis-gendered men who wish to improve their empathy and communication skills. This article offers a detailed list of potential problems associated with traditionally masculine communication styles and ways in which individuals can work to promote a more inclusive atmosphere as members of the community, in leadership roles, and as a group. Stokes' list of suggestions is comprehensive, citing relevant literature and discourse about important situations that gaming communities typically face. He advocates for a progressive approach to self-improvement, while acknowledging that mistakes do happen and that change is an ongoing process.

Taking the discussion of gender in a different direction, larp scholar **Olga Vorobyeva** explores "Crossgender Role-playing in Russian Larps." Using participant-observation of Russian larps and discourse analysis of discussion forum posts, Vorobyeva describes the ways in which the phenomenon of women portraying men has developed in the larp community and some of the backlash incurred by such enactments. The author further compares attitudes toward the enactment of crossplay in the Russian and Nordic larp communities, groups that have until recently developed in relative isolation from one another.[1] She suggests that while such gender transgressions in larp are often tolerated, many members of the Russian larp community are uncomfortable with females playing male characters, especially when portraying homosexual identities.

Also in the realm of documentation, **Matthew Webb** explains his team's game design philosophy in "*Planetfall*: Imagining the Future: Mobile Technology and Hard Science in Science Fiction Larping." This article offers background information, science fiction roots, player interviews, and photos from the hard science fiction larp *Planetfall* in Austin, TX. *Planetfall* integrates videos, web resources, mobile apps, and QR code technology. These tools streamline character creation; in-game actions; the management of character sheets and inventories; and the analysis of diegetic objects, flora, and fauna. Webb also explains the ways in which *Planetfall* has motivated some players to seek plausible scientific solutions to game-related problems, prompting independent research. *Planetfall* offers an interesting case study for the ways in which a leisure game can integrate easily accessible technology while also potentially serving a secondary educational function.

Finally, **William J. White**'s "'Actual Play' and the Forge Tradition" offers a first step at a larger project of documenting the Forge tabletop community's influential history. Applying both discourse and content analysis, White examines the various "seasons" of the Forge online discussion forum, which each emphasized different discursive priorities, mainly as established by the forum's moderator, Ron Edwards. White discusses how the focus for the Forge primarily involved the analysis of game systems through a process called Actual Play, where participants offered reports from game sessions for the community to dissect in order to better understand how design and subcultural expectations motivate play. A polarizing figure, Edwards emphasized the application of his GNS theory – which featured elements originally developed by members of an earlier online community, while often solely attributed to Edwards -- to these actual play sessions in an attempt to demonstrate how traditional tabletop game design often leads to frustrating play experiences. White examines the interactional dynamics during specific phases of the Forge, emphasizing the rich intellectual history represented by this community's contributions to game design innovation, while retaining a realistic perspective on the negative reactions also produced by this legacy.

Overall, each of the articles in the Journalistic Section offer powerful insights into various facets of community management, design principles, and identity exploration in gaming environments. I hope these pieces stimulate further excellent work on the potential applications and analysis of interactive storytelling.

—*Sarah Lynne Bowman*
Austin, TX
December 11, 2015

1. In the last few years, theorists and researchers have made efforts to bridge this gap. Examples include publications from Russians in the Nordic larp journals and the *Wyrd Con Companion Book*; presentations at the Nordic larp conferences; and the recent *Nordic-Russian Larp Dialog* book, which offers theory, praxis, and documentation, much of which previously was available only in Russian. The latter features Russian responses to popular Nordic articles and Nordic responses to articles featured in the book, c.f. Alexey Fedoseev, J. Tuomas Harviainen, and Olga Vorobyeva, *Nordic-Russian Larp Dialog* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Knudepunkt, 2015).

Love, Sex, Death, and Liminality: Ritual in Just a Little Lovin'

Sarah Lynne Bowman[1]

Just a Little Lovin' is commonly touted as one of the best Nordic larps ever designed by those who have played it. Originally written in 2012 by Tor Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grasmo, the larp explores the lives of people in alternative sexual and spiritual subcultures during the span of 1982-1984 in New York who attend the same 4th of July party each year. As the larp progresses, the AIDS crisis increasingly sweeps through their community, affecting each member directly or indirectly. The result is a cathartic explosion of emotions that leave a lasting impact on the majority of the players.

This article will discuss some of these rhetorical threads surrounding the design of *Just a Little Lovin'*. Then, I will emphasize the importance of the ritual spaces and structures within the larp, which work to enhance communal connection in- and out-of-game and help produce these strong moments of catharsis.

Player Discourse Surrounding *Just a Little Lovin'*

Oh no, not I! I will survive!
Oh, as long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive!
I've got all my life to live.
I've got all my love to give.
And I'll survive! I will survive! —*Gloria Gaynor*

In play reports, participants mention several powerful elements of the design. The characters have realistic motivations and relationship dynamics. The intersecting themes of desire, love, friendship, and fear of death interweave beautifully throughout the larp to provide a roller coaster of emotions for the players. The mechanics for sex and death are thoughtfully implemented, providing a meaningful, relatively safe framework in which to experience these powerful moments. The larp is organized into three Acts, with careful workshopping and debriefing exercises framing each phase. These breaks allow players opportunities to co-create the experience with one another through negotiation and agreement. While the larp does deal with the tragedy of disease impacting a tightly knit community of creative, experimental, open-minded people, the emphasis of the larp is not to dwell in tragedy, but rather to undergo a strengthening of that community through shared experience.

1. *Editor's Note:* This article was originally published on Nordiclarp.org on July 13, 2015.

Top: The rock band Urban Renaissance closed the drag/variety show every night with an energetic performance. Although Rain (right) died in Act II, the show went on in Act III. PHOTO: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Center: The theme of alternate sexuality, identity, and freedom juxtaposed with the tragedy of death permeates *Just a Little Lovin'*. PHOTO BY ELINA ANDERSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Below: Most characters came together each year in a ritualized fashion for the drag/variety show. Here, they enjoy a performance by the rock band Urban Renaissance. PHOTO: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Top: Although death permeated the lives of the characters in the game, the party went on even through Act III as a celebration of existence and love. PHOTO: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Center: One war veteran comforts another during a PTSD episode. The theme of death was woven into the larp in multiple ways: from AIDS to cancer to war. PHOTO BY ELINA ANDERSSON. CC-BY-NC.

As UK larper Mo Holkar recently wrote regarding the fourth run of the larp in Denmark 2015: "I have never had my mind opened more by a larp, nor felt more bonded to a group of co-players – including those who I didn't actually interact with during play. And, importantly, this is not because we came through a terrible experience together: it wasn't like that at all. It's because we came through an amazing and uplifting and life-affirming and worldview-changing experience together."[2] Similar accounts exist in articles by other former players:

Erik Winther Paisley: "I've got this sense that I've stolen a true glimpse of the past, or at least a past that could have been. We've created something real, and beautiful, and momentous. I don't know how to handle that. It's immense pride and I already feel nostalgic for it. In the most literal sense—I'm starting to feel the pangs of loss that are nostalgia. It's exactly the right emotion I need to be feeling right now. Beauty, loss, sorrow, pride, admiration, longing, pining for something."[3]

Eden Gallanter: "*Just a Little Lovin'* was full of life and color. Death was real, but we needed to make the most of whatever time we had left, in order to be together. The very structure of the game was oriented towards living, and even suffering was just another way to interact with others, to deepen a character, and add even more meaning to his or her life. Death was not a beautiful release; it was just the end."[4]

Miki Habryn: "Picture, if you will, a group of people discussing the death of one of their characters, which is directly brought about by the nature and behavior of another in the scene, talking about what kind of impressions they want to construct in this scene. Then they play the scene, to spec, with screaming, tears, loathing, self-hatred, disgust, horror, everything. Then one raises their head and calmly says 'thank you,' and, with tear tracks still drying and breath still shaking, they dis-

2. Mo Holkar, "Just a Little Lovin': Actually, More Than Just a Little," *Games! All Sorts of Different Ones*, July 5, 2015, http://blog.ukg.co.uk/just-a-little-lovin/,

3. Erik Winther Paisley, "'We Still Have Time': Experiencing the 1980's AIDS Crisis Through Larp, Sobbing with Relief at a Funeral, Dancing, Dragging, and Kissing a Stranger Out of Love For the Story," Medium.com, June 28, 2015, https://medium.com/@ewpaisley/they-luster-on-3f2838d6aed1.

4. Eden Gallanter, "The Bridge Between Love and Death," *Cheimonette*, July 6, 2015, http://www.cheimonette.com/blog/the-bridge-between-love-and-death

Top: Larp designer and co-organizer Tor Kjetil Edland gets everyone's attention during pre-game workshopping. Organizers often serve the role of guide in facilitating the ritual activity of larp.

Center: The larp afforded players the opportunity to shed old social roles, including sexual preference and identity, and explore intimacy in a relatively safe framework.

Bottom: A lesbian contingent with their dutch boy. Participants emphasize an intensified sense of community after the larp in their play accounts.
ALL PHOTOS: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

sect the emotions that each other's play brought about, praising the particular moves, words, and timing that brought the greatest effect in their character's response to the other characters. I still can't decide if its madness, emotional vampirism, or the most awesome thing I have ever participated in."[5]

Simon James Pettitt: "*JaLL* is without a doubt the most intense and [thoroughly] designed game I have ever played. I understand now why some call it the best larp in the world. There [are] other as well-designed games out there, but it's the mix of brilliant design with a theme and especially the handling of the theme that creates just a more intense experience."[6]

For more accounts, the impressive documentation book from the 2013 Danish run is available, which includes play reports from many of the participants, as well as organizer reflections.[7] Several other articles from past participants are also available on various web sites.[8]

Ultimately, much of the discourse surrounding the larp focuses upon the intense connections the experience creates between participants, the enhanced understanding of the struggles of countercultural movements during the period, and increased awareness about the AIDS crisis. From a design perspective, *Just a Little Lovin'* is also touted as successful due to its inclusion of metatechniques from the freeform and blackbox scenes and its careful framing with regard to workshops, negotiation, de-roleing, and debriefing.

My examination of *Just a Little Lovin'* will discuss this framing in more detail, emphasizing the multi-layered, ritualized nature of the larp design. The careful construction and use of ritual space facilitates progressively deeper and more intense levels of play. In this analysis, I will discuss ritual in terms of both a) atmospheric rituals within the larp transpiring in specifically established spaces, and b) the overarching game framework.

My intent in sharing these accounts is not to support the claim that this larp is the "best designed in the world," but rather to emphasize that careful inclusion of heavily ritualized processes in larp design can guide players to deeper levels of connection and catharsis.

All Larp is Ritual

Is everybody in? The ceremony is about to begin.
The entertainment for this evening is not new.
You've seen this entertainment through and through.
You have seen your birth, your life, your death.
You may recall all the rest.
Did you have a good world when you died?
Enough to base a movie on? – Jim Morrison

According to scholars Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner,[9] ritual involves three stages: a departure from the mundane world with thorough *separation*, an entrance into an in-between state called *liminality*, and a return to the mundane world with an *incorporation* of the liminal experiences.

a) **Separation:** During the separation stage, the group prepares to shed their everyday roles and enter into new ones for the purpose of the ritual. The separation phase can include practicing the ritual, costuming, makeup, masks, establishing ritual space, or other activities intended to facilitate the transition.

2) **Liminality:** Participants enter their temporary social roles and play parts in a performance

5. Miki Habryn, *Google+*, June 15, 2012, https://plus.google.com/u/0/+MikiHabryn/posts/1WDWJHbcsZX.

6. Simon James Pettitt, "Just a Little Lovin': Intro Post," Pettitt.dk, July 7, 2015, http://pettitt.dk/just-a-little-lovin-intro-post/.

7. Casper Gronemann and Claus Raasted, eds., *The Book of Just a Little Lovin' (2013 Denmark Run): Documenting a Larp Project about Desire, Friendship, and the Fear of Death* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2013), http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/pdf/books/book_jall.pdf.

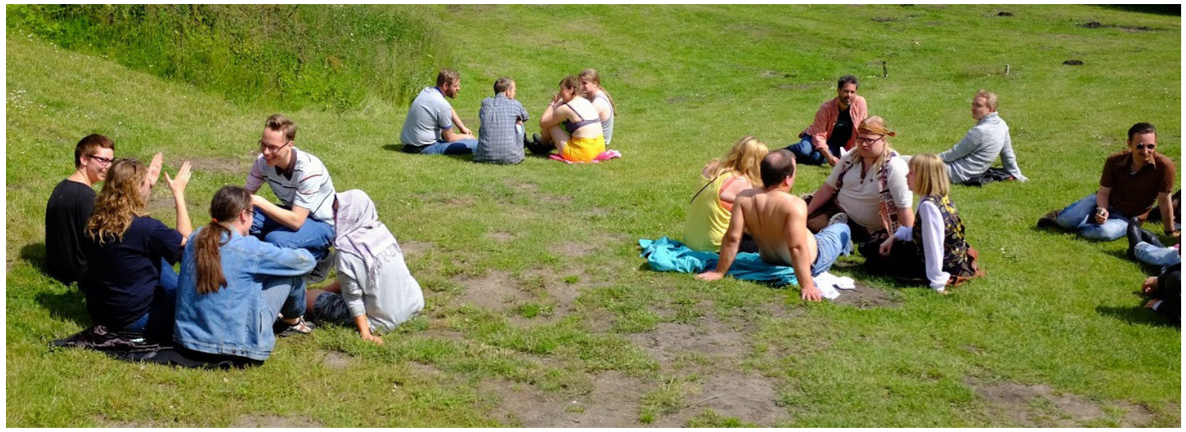
8. For examples, see reflections by: Elin Dalstål, "Just a Little Lovin' 2012," *Gaming as Women*, June 16, 2012, http://www.gamingaswomen.com/posts/2012/06/just-a-little-lovin-2012/; Petter Karlsson, "Just a Little Lovin' 2012 – A Larp About AIDS in the 80's" PetterKarlsson.se, October 26, 2012, http://petterkarlsson.se/2012/10/26/just-a-little-lovin-2012-a-larp-about-aids-in-the-80s/; Eleanor Saitta, "It's About Time," in *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*, edited by Juhana Pettersson (Helsinki, Finland: Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura, 2012), http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/a/a0/2012-States.of.play.pdf; Annika Waern, "Just a Little Lovin', and Techniques for Telling Stories in Larp," *Persona*, June 16, 2012, https://annikawaern.wordpress.com/2012/06/16/just-a-little-lovin-and-techniques-for-telling-stories-in-larp/, etc.

9. Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas: Form and Attributes of Rites of Passage," *Excerpt from* The Ritual Process (London, UK: Aldine, 1969). http://faculty.dwc.edu/wellman/Turner.htm.

Top: Map of the character core groups and subcultural associations in Act 2. PHOTO: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Center: Joani, Kohana, and Kim made up the Heart of Saratoga core group, running rituals for the cancer survivors and the larger gathering as a whole. PHOTO: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Bottom: Members of the Saratoga Pact of cancer survivors and their loved ones head to the woods for their yearly ritual of recommitment. PHOTO: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.



of some sort, either actively or passively. They cross over a "threshold" – or *limen* – into another state of being, which often transpires in a physical location specifically demarcated for the ritual. All participants agree to take part in this temporary, "betwixt and between" state, collectively agreeing to these new terms of their social reality. Turner refers to the liminal state as a "moment in and out of time": a paradoxical, transitional experience.[10]

3) **Incorporation:** Participants then return to their previous social roles, leaving the ritual space behind. However, they incorporate the liminal experiences into their own lives to greater and lesser degrees. For example, if a community holds a rite of passage to mark a marriage, the couple leaves the wedding with a new social status acknowledged by all present. After leisure ritual activities – called "liminoid" moments—the individual can determine how the experience will impact their involvement in the community and their development of self. [11]

Turner believed that rituals create *communitas*: a greater feeling of communal connection between participants. Additionally, rituals are often guided by a shaman figure: some sort of guide or facilitator of the process who helps establish the atmosphere, tone, and components of the ritual.

Top: Off-game negotiation within core groups in between Acts helps direct play for the next phase.

Center: Kohana during the raising of the flag, National Anthem, and subsequent speech.

Bottom: Eating together was an important ritual activity as members from different social circles had the chance to become acquainted. During the breakfast of Act III, an impromptu gay wedding took place. ALL PHOTOS: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Top: DJ Tony, singer-songwriter Marylou, and Nate, the Queen of Manhattan during the drag/variety show. PHOTO: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Center: Death was personified in the larp, guiding the characters to the Funeral and delivering the eulogy for those who passed. PHOTO: PETTER KARLSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Bottom: Lighting the paper balloons to commemorate the fallen. PHOTO BY ELINA ANDERSSON. CC-BY-NC.

Several scholars have emphasized the ritual nature of larp itself.[12] While not religious as many rituals are, secular ritual rites do exist in society. Generally speaking, larp includes the shedding of social roles, donning of new identities, performance of these identities in a temporary space guided by an organizer, and a return to the previous self, often with some sort of change individually and socially. Players often report a greater sense of community as the result of these experiences, as evidenced by several of the quotes above.

Therefore, *Just a Little Lovin'* is not unique in its ability to create these bonds, as all larp has the potential to do so. What I believe the larp excels at doing is creating well-timed, nearly continuous ritual activities that have the potential to personally transform both the player and the character. Due to the personal nature of the larp's content and its emphasis on sexuality, intimacy, vulnerability, and fear of death, the play offers participants the opportunity to reflect upon these aspects within themselves.

Each of the three Acts is framed by standard rituals common to the experience of most Americans to greater and lesser degrees: 1) the raising of the American flag while singing the National Anthem in the beginning and 2) a funeral at the end. Between these two poles of ritual experience, several smaller rituals are timed at regular intervals to offer potent, transformative experiences for characters and, by proxy, their players. On each side of these Acts, out-of-character ritual activities of workshopping, debriefing, and negotiating provide an even more structured frame. In this regard, *Just a Little Lovin'* can be seen as producing rituals within rituals within rituals for the players. Leaving mundane life to go to a camp for five days with a group of people is a shift in perspective in and of itself, which is then followed by larping, and then followed by ritual activities within the larp.

10. Turner would distinguish play activities like larp as "liminoid" rather than "liminal" as they arise from leisure cultures, but this distinction is beyond the scope of this current discussion. For more information, see Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," *Rice University Studies* 60.3 (1974): 53-92.

11. Turner, ibid.

12. For a few examples, see Christopher I. Lehrich, "Ritual Discourse in Role-playing Games," last modified October 1, 2005, *The Forge*, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/ritual_discourse_in_RPGs.html; J. Tuomas Harviainen, "Information, Immersion, Identity: The Interplay of Multiple Selves During Live-Action Role-Play," *Journal of Interactive Drama* 1, no. 2 (October 2006): 11; Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games,* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010, pp. 15, 48-53; J. Tuomas Harviainen and Andreas Lieberoth, "The Similarity of Social Information Processes in Games and Rituals: Magical Interfaces," *Simulation & Gaming* (April 10, 2011): 528-549; Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Returning to the Real World: Debriefing After Role-playing Games," Nordiclarp.org, December 8, 2014, http://nordiclarp.org/2014/12/08/debrief-returning-to-the-real-world/.

Top: Members of the Indigo House, a polyfidelity commune in which all members were in an exclusive, group relationship. PHOTO BY SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN. CC-BY-NC.

Bottom: Post-game connection between participants through the playing of music and drums, which were central ritualized activities during the larp.

Ritual Spaces and Subcultures in the Larp

Hey, babe. Take a walk on the wild side.
—Lou Reed

The structure of the character relations in *Just a Little Lovin'* involves each character belonging to one or more subcultures that were representative of the alternative scenes of the late '70s and early '80s in America. These subcultures include: rich gay men; the gay leather/fetish scene; drag performers; lesbian clubs; literary circles; the night club scene as exemplified by Studio 54; alternative spirituality seekers; tantra practitioners; members of a polyfidelity commune; performance artists; swingers; peace activists; a group of cancer survivors; the Radical Faeries masculinity movement; and AIDS activists. Effectively, each character had multiple connections within some of these subcultures, including their core group of friends, their primary social circle, and their extended connections within their party scene.

These subcultures often had ritualized activities associated with them, as outlined in detail below. I played Joani, one of the leaders of the Spirituals, which meant that my in-game husband Kohana (Kevin Burns), best friend Kim (Caroline Christiane Kasten Koren), and I were responsible for running some of these rituals ourselves. Joani and Kohana ran the Saratoga Pact of friendship for the cancer survivors in a copse of trees in the woods; Kohana and Kim ran the Green Drink ritual of personal transformation around the bonfire at midnight; Joani ran tantra workshops in a special room complete with lava lamps, dark lighting, and pallets; and Kohana ran all-male drum circles, also around the bonfire. Other subcultures had similar ritual spaces, such as the stage, the dance floor, and the "dark room."

These spaces were established carefully as important parts of the scenography and were not in any way incidental to the setting. They offered Temporary Autonomous Zones for the Temporary Autonomous Identities of the characters: spaces where the rules of reality could function differently and where both characters and players could explore new facets of themselves.[13]

This design created the possibility for overlap and exposure to new experiences. Rather than creating little pockets of exclusion, the social space was designed so that the environments occupied by members of these groups were in close physical and social proximity to one another. For example, the tantra room where my character ran workshops was physically next to the "dark room," where cruising, BDSM, and lesbian activities transpired. Sounds from that room emanated into our space and some participants wandered between both at various times.

This design encouraged "regular" attendees of each subcultural space to experiment with new ones, especially when all characters were expected to participate in group rituals such as the Green Drink ceremony, which might normally not interest some individuals. As an example, my character helped run the Saratoga Pact ritual, an annual ceremony in which cancer survivors renewed their vow to remain true to themselves, live life to its fullest, and always support one another. As the years went on, we inducted new members into the Saratoga Pact based upon their connections with previous survivors: lovers, close friends, family members, etc. Therefore, other characters were exposed to a small part of the survivor experience, just as many from the Pact were exposed to the new worlds of drag queens, BDSM, performance art, etc.

In another example, due to my off-game interest in drag and desire to help with the show, my character spent a good deal of time helping with makeup in the backstage area. This experience gave her access to a new subcultural realm and mode of artistic expression, as well as deeper connections with that social group in the game. The design of the physical and social space facilitated these sorts of crossovers.

13. Mike Pohjola, "Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering, and Emancipating Identities," in *Beyond Role and Play*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2004), 84-85; Saitta, ibid.

Ritual in the Structure of the Larp Design

You can dance, you can jive
Having the time of your life
See that girl, watch that scene
Digging the Dancing Queen—ABBA

Just a Little Lovin' takes place over the span of three Acts, each focusing upon a central theme: Act I is Desire, Act II is the Fear of Death, and Act III is Friendship. The total game time is approximately five days. 5pm until 12pm the next day is spent in-character during the Act, framed by workshopping before and debriefing after. Before each Act, players negotiate with their groups about how best to proceed, followed by 1-2 hours of downtime. The whole experience is followed by deroleing and debriefing, with a much-needed afterparty in the evening after Act III, where players can reconnect with their out-of-game selves, as well as process their experiences and connect with others.

Game time itself is heavily structured with back-to-back in-game rituals, which I detail below. Players are empowered to design and run many of these rituals themselves, with the exception of the National Anthem, the Lottery of Death, and the funerals, which are run by the organizers. The 2015 run of the game had roughly the following structure, with some variation from Act to Act of non-essential rituals like tantra, BDSM, and drum circles:

1) **Song:** The organizers play the "Just a Little Lovin'" song by Dusty Springfield while characters are frozen. This song ritually starts and ends the entire larp.

2) **Entrance to Mr. T's party:** The party is itself a ritualized escape from the mundane world, as people can feel free to explore new identities. For example, a professor by day can engage in gay BDSM scenes at night.

3) **National Anthem:** The raising of the American flag on the porch, accompanied by the singing of the American National Anthem.

4) **Speeches:** Mr. T gives a welcome speech. Kohana gives a speech to honor the Saratoga Pact and summons members to that ceremony.

5) **Saratoga Pact:** Joani and Kohana run the Saratoga Pact ceremony for the cancer survivors in the woods away from the main party. When I ran this ritual, I had us recite the words of the pact in call-and-response format. Then, I asked each of those gathered to state their intentions for the year, evaluate past intentions, and induct new members. I hoped the intention part of the ritual would serve as a form of *steering*, [14] where player-characters could focus their goals for each day of play in a directed manner.

6) **The Games (optional):** The Indigo House members organized some fun physical game activities in the field during Act II.

7) **Dinner:** Ritual of eating together. Mr. T usually gave a speech during dinner.

8) **Tantra Workshops (optional):** In the tantra room, I ran workshops in Acts I and III, primarily using techniques of guided mediation, eye gazing, and ars amandi.[15]

9) **Dark room (optional):** BDSM scenes, lesbian hour, and cruising pick-ups. The dark room was intended for characters willing to have semi-anonymous sexual encounters. Lesbian hour was part of the structure of the larp in order to establish liminal space for those characters as well.

10) **Drum circles (optional):** In Acts II and III, Kohana/Kevin ran all-male drum circles for the Spirituals and Radical Faeries around the bonfire, with several other men attending as well.

14. Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Eleanor Saitta, "The Art of Steering: Bringing the Player and the Character Back Together," in The Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book, edited by Charles Bo Nielsen and Claus Raasted (Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2014), 106-177.

15. Nudity and actual sex were forbidden at the larp, as was the consumption of real drugs or alcohol. The sex mechanics are described in the next section.

11) **Blackbox scenes (optional):** Transpiring throughout the Acts, the blackbox was a liminal space within which players could negotiate and play out scenes from the past, the future, or fantasies. Two blackbox rooms were set aside for these purposes and did not "exist" in the normal game space. Our group used this space, for example, for Kohana to guide the Spirituals through a shamanic journey to meet their spirit animals—a scene that had transpired in the past.

12) **Drag /variety show:** Performance art, drag shows, singing, male stripping, poetry readings, anti-war protests, safe sex public service announcements, and rock band performances. Most of the characters attended or participated in this ritual during each Act.

13) **Dance party (optional):** Seduction on the dance floor, vogue-offs, circles where characters danced in the center, and general revelry transpired during this time.

14) **Hookah smoking (optional):** A "love nest" similar to a treehouse in the woods was set up with lights, pallets, and a hookah. Characters ritually smoked tobacco, laughed, and shared stories.

15) **Green Drink Ceremony at midnight:** Serves as an in-game ritual *and* a metatechnique. The characters consumed the Green Drink, which has unspecified contents in-game. This technique allowed players the chance to steer their characters toward explosions of building conflict or redirect them into new perspectives. Brilliant in replicating the transformative moments of hallucinogens that many people experience, while also offering the player an opportunity to take the reins of the character in their desired direction.

16) **Fireworks and paper balloon ceremony:** Each night after the green drink, fireworks were lit. In Act II and Act III, paper balloons were lit in memory of those who passed that year. The balloons rose into the air, then the lights winked out just over the horizon.

17) **Aerobics (optional):** In at least one Act, the Amazons, a lesbian-run aerobics club, led a workout session for interested parties.

18) **Breakfast:** Ritual of eating together. During Act III, two gay characters had an impromptu, "unlawful" wedding during breakfast to celebrate being alive and in love. Another ritual within a ritual. This moment later proved poignant for the players; Marriage Equality was finally ruled legal by the Supreme Court the next day in the U.S., over thirty years later in real time.

19) **Song Between Life and Death:** In the diner, a song was played to indicate the space between life and death, as well as the passage of time. All players were expected to remain quiet during the song, though they could hold hands or hug.

20) **The Lottery of Death:** Angels arrived to announce the Lottery of Death. Characters had to place the amount of lottery tickets in the hat equal to the risk level of their sexual activity in the last year. Names were drawn and those characters were called away.

21) **Death arrives personified as a woman:** Characters were led outside and instructed to collect flowers for the funeral. Chopin's "Funeral March" was played in the background.

22) **Death marches the group to the funeral space:** Individuals who survived death that year were released to their loved ones.

23) **Funeral:** The group approached the coffins, where the characters who died lay. Death read the second chorus of the National Anthem like a eulogy, which framed the end of the Act.

Little downtime existed between the non-optional scheduled events, but characters had plenty of time for seduction, explosive arguments, breakups, drug overdoses, or laughing around the hookah. The tight schedule ensured that usually no more than 1-2 hours passed where no significant group event was transpiring. This structure afforded players consistent involvement with the larp on some level.

Additionally, these in-game spaces sometimes changed meaning or significance over the course of the larp. Spaces where casual sex once occurred such as the dark room were often eerily empty in later Acts as the fear of death became a palpable mood. Rituals also changed; the drag/variety show became much darker and sadder as the Acts progressed. Still, having the primary rituals and spaces remain intact added a sense of consistency for a community plagued by fear and grief.

Off-game Ritualized Structures

Let's have some fun, this beat is sick.
I wanna take a ride on your disco stick…
Let's play a love game, play a love game.
Do you want love or you want fame?
Are you in the game? Dans le love game?
—Lady Gaga

Another important ritualized structure within the larp involved the sex mechanics. In everyday life, sexual encounters are sometimes considered liminal acts in their own right. In larps, sex scenes are approached in multiple ways: not pursued at all, played literally, or enacted using representational techniques such as backrubs, ars amandi, rock-paper-scissors, or other "resolution" mechanics.

In *Just a Little Lovin'*, sex scenes also followed a ritual structure. One player would offer a pink feather to another, which represented an invitation to a sex scene. The other could choose to accept or deny the feather. Denying the feather did not represent an actual in-game rejection, but rather out-of-game consent to play a scene. Players would then go off-game and negotiate the boundaries of the scene, comfort with kissing/touching, and the events that would occur. Groping of breasts or genitals was not permitted. Players had to remain clothed and use a wooden phallus as a representational object to indicate sexual touch regardless of whether the sex was gay, lesbian, queer, or heteronormative. When the negotiated scene was over, characters stood side-by-side and used the Monologue metatechnique, which allowed them to externalize their character's thoughts to the other player. Altogether, these metatechniques ritualized the beginning, middle, and end of each sex scene in a way that allowed for intensity, while maintaining a sense of safety and player distance.

Players could also call "cut" or "brake" in any scene. They could move their bodies to subtly indicate discomfort with kissing or touching in a non-verbal way that did not break the scene, a maneuver that was termed Deflection. Again, these safety mechanisms did not affect the fiction of the larp, but provided a greater sense of comfort for many of the participants engaging in intimate encounters.

Overall, extensive workshopping in large and small groups served as the separation phase for the main ritual of the larp, as did costuming. For the incorporation phase, the organizers ran structured debriefs that lasted around 1-2 hours in groups of approximately ten people. After Act III, we de-roled by placing a piece of our character's costuming in the center of a large circle, then wrote letters to our characters as ourselves. We were assigned a de-roleing buddy, to whom we read the letters. We were expected to exchange contact information and check in with our buddy in two weeks after the larp. These processes aided in both the return to the self and in reconciling the relationship between the self and the character. The organizers then invited guest speakers to discuss their experiences with HIV activism and with cancer, which served as a way to contextualize the themes we had just larped with real world experiences and facts.

As mentioned earlier, the afterparty was another crucial part of this larp, allowing players time to decompress, distance, and discuss events with other participants. Additionally, each year at the Nordic larp conference Knudepunkt, organizers host an hour-long *Just a Little Lovin'* dance party, which many players attend in their costumes from the larp. Social media sites like Facebook also provide outlets for people to discuss their experiences, organize reunions, and share information about HIV and other relevant topics.

Summary

The game content of *Just a Little Lovin'* on its own is powerful, exploring themes of sex, love, death, and friendship. Adding ritual elements to the larp works to draw players even deeper into the experience. For example, many participants can no longer hear the songs built into the larp design without a flood of memories and powerful emotions returning to them. Even if the character rejects the content of one of the rituals in-game, thinking it "weird" or "uninteresting," these events offer the opportunity for the character to react to in-game stimuli, which can draw them deeper into immersion. Additionally, the repetition of these in-game rituals in every Act with changes in the fiction each time can create new meaning: a sense of irony, feelings of grief, a sense of stability in an uncertain world.

All larps can include these ritualistic techniques and many larps have similar spaces set aside. Some fantasy and post-apocalyptic larps, for example, have elaborate religions built into the game, complete with rituals, sacred spaces, and mythology. Other Nordic larps such as KoiKoi and Totem have included extensive rituals as well, which are worth examining with regard to their impact on the larp experience.

In the case of *Just a Little Lovin'*, however, the inclusion of vulnerability, sexuality, romantic intimacy, and death summons a particularly cathartic element for many of the players, especially since these elements become intertwined. Therefore, *Just a Little Lovin'* demonstrates how ritual elements in larp design combined with complex interweaving social connections and a strong theme can provoke intense emotional reactions and feelings of communal connection in the players.

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Decoding the Default: Secrets and Powers Larp

Nat Budin

Within the world of theatre-style larp, there is a form of game that is so well-established and so prevalent that, for many practitioners, it has no name. Rather, it is often thought of as "normal larp" or "traditional theatre-style larp." This article, following the lead of Evan Torner and Katherine Castiello Jones, will call it "secrets and powers larp."[1]

As newer styles of larp have come along, they have been analyzed through essays, manifestos, lectures, and workshops, but rarely has the secrets and powers form been given the same treatment. There exists a good deal of writing that often covers how to create effective secrets and powers larps, from sources such as Mike Young, Stephen Balzac, Jeff Diewald, and the members of the MIT Assassins' Guild, but these works rarely distinguish between what makes a good secrets and powers larp and what makes a good larp in general. Perhaps this is because, within the theatre-style larp communities in which these authors operate, secrets and powers larp is considered to be the default.

Secrets and powers larp is prevalent in a number of different larp communities, including Intercon, UK Freeforms, and Live Game Labs (née Enigma). I got my start in larp through the Intercon community, and began my career as a larp writer in 2003 with secrets and powers games. With my group, Alleged Entertainment, I have been involved in creating six such games, as well as eleven non-secrets and powers larps.

This article will give a brief analysis and description of the secrets and powers form as such, attempt to give a few broad strokes about what makes for a good secrets and powers larp, and end with a manifesto for the form. In researching this article, I have interviewed Liliya Benderskaya, Susan Weiner, and Mike Young—all authors of numerous secrets and powers larps—about their design process and lessons they have learned over the years.

What is a Secrets and Powers Larp?

Torner and Jones define a secrets and powers larp as one "for which the chief design interventions include the depositing of hidden information among the player-characters (PCs) that may or may not be revealed over the course of play." They also note the typical inclusion of limited character abilities that can produce in-game effects, as well as the hierarchical power differential inherent between GMs and players.[2]

This description is accurate, but fails to acknowledge or account for the player perspective. From the player point of view, character goals and inter-character relationships are the driving force of action in the larp. Benderskaya and Young both emphasized to me the importance of players having enough to do, and in a secrets and powers larp, this action comes from the characters wanting something.[3]

Secrets and powers larps date back at least as far as 1983, the year *Rekon-1* debuted at Boskone XX in Boston. Created by Walt Freitag, *Rekon-1* is arguably the first modern theatre-style larp, and it helped establish many conventions of the secrets and powers form.[4] According to *Rekon-1*'s GM and creator, it was the first larp "where players are cast in pre-generated character roles written to interweave in an enormous relationship map."[5]

In a secrets and powers larp, the characters are prewritten and designed by a team of non-player writers, who may or may not be the same as the runtime GMs. Sometimes the writers will take suggestions from players, but players are never allowed full control of their own character histories. This process allows the writers to place secret information into the game. Once characters have been written, the runtime GM team chooses which players will be cast as which pre-written characters. This process is often, but by no means always, done through a casting questionnaire.

Secrets are typically the coin of the realm in such a larp. Most characters' goals are unachievable without information the character does not start the game knowing, so working within the information economy to trade secrets is a major part of playing a secrets and powers larp. Typically, a secrets and powers game will begin with characters set in a particular location, and once the GMs call "game on," they are free to interact. At any given time, several different conversations will be happening. This is not incidental; in fact, it is vital to the design of the game. Multiple simultaneous threads of action mean that no player can hear everything being discussed at a time, which allows secrets to remain secret to most.

Naturally, a secrets and powers game also includes powers. In many games, such as *Rekon-1*, Jim MacDougal's *The Final Voyage of the Mary Celeste*, and Young's *Colonel Sebastian T. Rawhide's Circus of the Spectacular*, these powers are in some way superhuman in nature, but that feature is by no means necessary. Some secrets and powers larps, such as *Torch of Freedom*, contain only powers that are entirely realistic, such as a high political position or the only key to a locked chest. Powers, as Torner and Jones point out, serve to make distinctions between what actions different characters are capable of taking, and therefore, what effect they can have on the in-game story.[6]

In addition to secrets and powers, characters usually receive some form of goals. Opinions on the importance and implementation of character goals varied amongst the game designers I interviewed, but all agreed that goals are an important element of a successful game. The existence of a goal implies that it can either be successfully achieved or not, and therefore, that player actions will affect the outcome of the game's story.

Frequently, characters will have mutually exclusive goals from one another. For example, in *The Trial of the Big Bad Wolf*, Freddy the pig wants to get Brian the wolf executed on murder charges, while Brian – naturally—wants the opposite. Opposing goals can be useful for several reasons. According to Weiner, conflict—particularly in political negotiation plots—leads to interaction between players and can be a good source of interest. Benderskaya agrees, pointing out that a lack of conflict can often lead to characters who are supposed to be best friends not actually interacting much. She also notes that conflict can make resolution of a goal emotionally fulfilling for players.

Mutually opposed goals, naturally, mean that some players will achieve their goals while others will not. According to Young, it is consequently very important that within a secrets and powers game, "setbacks and failures are not game ruiners ... goal achievement should not be a metric of success. Failing to achieve goals isn't the same as failing in the larp."

Note that this structure, by its nature, is distinct from many theatre-style campaign larps, including White Wolf's popular *Mind's Eye Theatre* system as it is typically used. In a campaign setting, players usually have a great deal more control over the character histories than in most one-shot larps. The design levers used to construct secrets and powers larps are, in this situation, often outside the reach of the GMs or writing staff of the campaign.

There are, however, campaign larps that incorporate the secrets and powers form to one degree or another. One such campaign is *To Be Continued*, in which the writing staff solicited character ideas from players and then wrote full-fledged character sheets for each of them. This allowed for secrets and powers play. According to staff member Kat Davis, "We wove the world, and thus the conflicts, in with the setting and original characters sheets we wrote."[7]

Davis, who also has experience in several different White Wolf larp campaigns, noted that this is very different than the style of play one would typically encounter in *Vampire*, where much of the conflict is brought into game by players themselves, or in *Werewolf*, where conflicts do often come from outside the player group, but are most often resolved by mechanical means rather than the trading of secrets or the use of powers. Nonetheless, secrets and powers play within White Wolf's various campaign settings, although not the norm, is certainly possible.

Because conflict is so much a part of this form, most secrets and powers games include some form of conflict resolution mechanic, which is often a physical combat mechanic. *Jeff Diewald notes* a particular sort of player, which he terms the "Gunslinger," who thrives on combat and winning at conflicts.[8] Young has experimented with many different forms of conflict resolution in larp, including the innovative "You Are Your Own GM" system he developed for *Lullaby of Broadway*, which allows other players to act as objective third parties to adjudicate conflicts without the need for involving a game master.

Despite the emphasis on conflict, powers, and goal achievement in this form, all the larp creators I interviewed agreed that it is not necessary for all players to have equally difficult goals. Benderskaya added the caveat that it is usually a good idea to balance for the amount of time goals are expected to take to achieve, so that every

1. Evan Torner and Katherine Castiello Jones, "The Parlor Sandbox: Counter-Players and Ephemera in American Freeform," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014,* edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014), 68.

2. Ibid., 68-69.

3. Liliya Benderskaya, in discussion with the author, May 18, 2015; Mike Young, in discussion with the author, May 31, 2015.

4. Nat Budin, "Over Time: Intercon and the Evolution of Theatre-style Larp in the Northeast," in *Wyrd Con Companion 2012*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek, 63 (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012).

5. Walt Freitag. "LARPs—Reply 6." *The Forge*, September 18, 2002, http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=3512.msg33319#msg33319.

6. Torner and Jones, 68.

7. Kat Davis, in conversation with the author, August 13, 2015.

8. Jeff Diewald, "So You Want to Write a LARP: LARP Theory 101," 65 (presentation, *NELCO 2014*, Chelmsford, MA). http://www.vortexofchaos.net/presentations/LARP_Theory_101.pdf.

player can have something to do at all times if possible.

Indeed, it is often desirable for some goals not to be achievable at all—with the caveat that players should be warned that this is the case. For Benderskaya and Young, the most important thing when constructing character goals is that they follow naturally from the character and the setting of the game; if that means that some characters will have goals that, for whatever reason, are not achievable in the game, those goals should still be included so that players can use them as an emotional hook for roleplaying. And since, as Young pointed out, achieving goals is not the same as winning at larp, failing to achieve an unachievable goal may well be a roleplaying success.

Although the larp itself may be wildly unbalanced in a game design sense, GMs of secrets and powers larps make an effort to be fair and evenhanded in their adjudication. This sense of "fairness" is perhaps counterintuitive, but goes along with the ethos that, for a player, achieving character goals is not necessarily the object of the game. Rather, in attempting to achieve those goals, one fulfills the real objective, which is to create a satisfying narrative.

Constructing a Narrative

In a secrets and powers game, narrative is paramount. According to Diewald, when creating this type of larp, "you need a story. This is where you have to start."[9] Writers go about this process differently: Young starts his game designs by outlining a narrative that attempts to tie a group of characters together; Benderskaya begins by using a few character concepts to spin out a larger story and setting; and Weiner begins with a concept she wants the game to convey and creates a story that supports that concept. All of these larp creators, however, see narrative as central to the games they want to build.

It is worth noting here that the term "narrative," as used herein as well as by the interviewees, should not be confused with *narrativism* as described by The Forge's GNS Theory. The GNS model focuses on a players' agenda to create a "good story," and the role of RPG systems in supporting that agenda.[10] Secrets and powers larp is often compatible with the narrativist agenda, but the onus for creating the story is on the authors of the game rather than the players. Further, narrative-driven design in secrets and powers larp is not usually at odds with gamist or simulationist play; the design of the larp should account for these player agendas and work with them to create the narrative.

9. Diewald, 21.

10. Ron Edwards, "System Does Matter," *The Forge*, 2004, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/system_does_matter.html.

I have already touched on one of the tools secrets and powers larps use to create a satisfying narrative for players: the unusual concept of fairness embedded in these games. It is often narratively useful for some characters to start out with advantages over others or for the "good guys" to win—although not too easily. The traditional idea of "game balance" is at direct odds with narrative in these cases. It is, however, important that GMs work in unbiased and transparent ways to enforce the unfair system built into the narrative. In this case, "transparency" means setting expectations of one's behavior ahead of time and then behaving consistently with those expectations—not to be confused with transparency of game design, which is certainly not present in secrets and powers larp.

Because a secrets and powers game affords its players choices, and because those choices can lead to failure to achieve goals, players of these games become personally emotionally invested in the character's struggles. According to Benderskaya, "nuance, conflict, complication, and the depth of the emotions involved are what makes a plot." These struggles can be between characters or between the character and some outside factor: "If you put a shitty thing into the universe, you have to ask how the players are going to be able to fix it, because they'll want to."

For a designer, giving players freedom to make choices, to succeed and to fail, can be a powerful tool in making a narrative feel satisfying to its participants. This tool, however, carries with it a serious risk: how can the designer be sure the story the players co-create will be coherent and have a well-structured narrative arc?

According to Young, building resiliency into games is "very, very difficult to do. The problem is that players don't react well to the limitations of what they can or can't do in secrets and powers games. They want to feel like they can do anything, even if they know as players that they can't for [the good of] the game." He suggests that better player education can be a solution to this problem; in other words, players should be explicitly taught about narrative steering. Steering, as defined by Montola, Stenros, and Saitta, means "the process in which a player influences the behavior of her character for non-diegetic reasons." In the case of Young's example, players could be taught to make choices for characters in order to guide the game towards the narrative arc it is designed to produce—in Montola, Stenros and Saitta's words, "game mastering and fateplay."[11]

11. Markos Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Eleanor Saitta. "The Art of Steering – Bringing the Player and the Character Back Together," *Nordiclarp.org*, April 29, 2015, http://nordiclarp.org/2015/04/29/the-art-of-steering-bringing-the-player-and-the-character-back-together/; *Editor's note:* Fateplay often means story events that will occur during the course of the game regardless of player choice. See Nordic Larp Wiki, "Fate," Nordiclarpwiki.org, August 25, 2015, http://nordiclarp.org/w/index.php?title=Fate&redirect=no.

Weiner emphasizes the importance of building in resilient structures, stating, "Any crucial information needs fallbacks to get into the game." If a narrative point relies on one player accomplishing a certain goal, there is a good chance that it will never happen, so Weiner recommends "multiple goals [to bring out the same thing], so that the goals can easily fail-safe for each other." She points to one of her early games, *Counterculture*, as an example of what can happen if a game design fails to do this, "There was one character who was responsible for distributing plot and involvement to a lot of others, and the player chose not to [do so]." Diewald also makes this point, stating, "Information has to exist in more than one place, and there has to be a way to get at it in those places."[12]

Building resilient and redundant structures into a game helps ensure that important narrative points actually come out, while still allowing players to have the subjective experience of control over their own character's actions and destiny. It is a hidden form of creative control built into the game in a way that deliberately avoids interfering with the players' sense of freedom. That sense, regardless of how illusory the freedom may be, is vital for the player to become emotionally invested in a secrets and powers larp, which demands that players take deliberate and proactive action to move the plot along.

The subjective player experience of investment in the narrative is how a secrets and powers game lives or dies. According to Diewald, "each character should have their own story concept that helps to build the global story."[13] Benderskaya constructs larps by role-playing as the characters with her collaborators, which allows her to ensure that each character is interesting and emotionally compelling for players. She often discovers through this process that a character turns out not to be who she initially thought they would, stating, "You can't always anticipate how a personality will play out."

Allowing each player to build a narrative arc for themselves in which their character is the protagonist of their own story is very important to Benderskaya, who says, "as a player, this is the only time I'm going to have to play this character, so my goals are not going to stand still." Young agrees, "Once I start the game and hand it off to the players, it's their game. I will not keep players from doing something."

A strong narrative depends on going somewhere, so when constructing a secrets and powers larp, it is important to think through the pacing. According to Young, "Games are not completely about plots; plot is stuff to do and character motivation ... but the revelation of secrets is the other half of secrets and powers, and that's where you get your emotional hooks."

12. Diewald, 31.

13. Ibid., 24.

Because secrets and powers play is player-directed by default, various techniques have been developed to guide the pacing of this style of larp without impinging too much on player freedom. Weiner suggests giving goals multiple parts in order to reveal information in the correct sequence. Young recommends adding scheduled scenes to games in order to create pivotal dramatic moments—and to prevent those moments from occurring too early. Whichever techniques a game uses, the interviewees generally agreed that players of secrets and powers larps want a dramatic arc to the game, but also do not want to feel "railroaded" into a particular set of actions.

All of these considerations point at a perhaps surprising fact about secrets and powers games: the structures inherent in the form do not, in and of themselves, make for a good game. A secrets and powers game can have a beautifully-constructed plot web, interesting special abilities, great reveals, and good pacing, but these factors alone do not result in a compelling narrative.

One common addition to the secrets and powers play style is romance. Role-playing the development—or dissolution—of a romantic relationship draws on an entirely different set of skills than trading information to achieve character goals, yet these styles of play can be complementary. According to Benderskaya, "a love plot on its own is not plot." It can, however, function as plot through the addition of conflicts and external factors dependent on the relationships between characters. To function well, such a plot must not be inherently at odds with the freedom to make decisions on a pure role-playing level, a danger about which Weiner cautions. The two play styles must be able to act in concert and the level of plot control the secrets and powers form affords to game designers can be used to resolve this tension.

Beyond romance plots, other emotionally difficult elements can and should be incorporated into a successful secrets and powers larp. According to Young, "It should have emotional hooks. The players should feel invested in their characters beyond just achieving goals." Jeff Diewald goes as far as to say that forcing players to make tough decisions is a rule of good larp design.[14]

Regardless of its exact form, to achieve narrative greatness, this type of game must include something beyond mere secrets and powers.

14. Diewald, 12.

Assessing the Form: Strengths and Weaknesses

The secrets and powers form provides a flexible and lightweight structure within which an emotionally compelling narrative can be constructed. The ability to hybridize this structure with other styles of play, such as enacting romance or role-playing tough decisions, is not only a strength of the form, it is vital for success.

Another strength of secrets and powers larps, as discussed above, is their ability to produce emotional investment in players. As previously mentioned, the feeling of freedom to control character actions can help make a player feel invested in a character. Embedded in this feeling of freedom is a tension with one of the supposed tenets of this form: the idea that players should not think about goal achievement in terms of "winning" and "losing."

This idea is, at some level, a lie. The form requires players to act in accordance with what their character wants and emotional investment comes from caring about those wants. As larp designers, we want players to feel their characters' fear of failure and we want them to feel a sense of accomplishment at their characters' successes. The challenge in attempting to accomplish a non-obvious or highly opposed goal can deepen that sense of accomplishment upon the goal's successful completion.

Thus, a secrets and powers player must learn a sort of doublethink. They must be able to immerse themselves in the game in a goal-directed way, but also to see their character's function in the game as a system and understand that, for the good of the narrative, their character sometimes must "lose."

Goal-directed play is a powerful tool. For inexperienced or reticent players, it can provide an easy way to feel powerful emotions in connection with a larp. These emotions can serve as a gateway to deep role-playing experiences. Thus, using a secrets and powers structure as a skeleton upon which to build an emotional story can lower the barriers to entry into that story and produce a deeper level of engagement for players.

The danger of this approach is that, past a certain point, goals can also be a barrier to immersion. According to Weiner, "goal-oriented play, mechanics, and dealing with weird things pulls you out of the emotional intensity" to a degree. Benderskaya's solution to this problem is to make sure goals always derive from what the character would naturally want, and to favor purely social, mechanics-free solutions to problems in her games.

A Place in the Larp World

According to Torner and Jones, "many of the design practices taken for granted in the larp community actually produce a very specific type of game."[15] This is certainly the case: they produce a secrets and powers larp. As a form, the secrets and powers larp works well in a wide range of literary genres, settings, and moods, and has been successfully implemented in formats ranging from one hour to ten days.

In recent years, the secrets and powers larp has existed increasingly alongside other forms, such as horde larps, tale-telling larps,[16] parlor sandbox,[17] Jeepform,[18] and American Freeform.[19] As these forms have risen to prominence, the secrets and powers larp has existed in dialogue with them.

Cyndy Cooper's *Kind Friends Together*, for example, is a secrets and powers larp that incorporates ideas drawn from Nordic freeform, affording players greater-than-normal control over their characters' futures while keeping the structure of a secrets and powers game in order to deliver a dramatic twist midway through. The author's own game, *The Last Seder*, inverts this formula, removing all player control over outcomes in order to give an even greater emotional punch.

As theatre-style larp grows and advances, changes to existing forms are both desirable and inevitable. Secrets and powers larp in 2015 looks quite different than in 1983, but remains fundamentally and structurally sound, continuing to provide players engaging narratives and a framework for experimentation and innovation.

A Secrets and Powers Manifesto

Secrets and powers is the oldest form of theatre-style larp. Its longevity and continued popularity is a testament to its virtues as a form.

We, the practitioners of secrets and powers larp stand, above all, for compelling narrative. In exchange for a measure of control over the narrative direction of the larp, we give players a worthwhile, emotionally engaging, and active role-play experience.

We, the GMs, will write the characters. We will assign players their characters. In all our dealings with players, we promise to be fair and evenhanded, as possible. We will set expectations of our game and our role in it ahead of time and we will live up to them.

As players, you will have the chance to truly embody your character. For a brief interval, you have freedom to act as them and make decisions on their behalf. Your desires will be their desires; their goals will be your goals. You may succeed or fail, but you will shape your character's own destiny. You will be the protagonist of your own story.

In addition, you will be a major player in a larger story. Something strange will be going on, and be you hero, villain, or neither, you will have a hand in it. You will uncover secrets; you will obtain resources; you will use your powers to bend the universe to your will or you will die trying.

And afterwards, we will all have pizza.

15. Torner and Jones, 69.

16. Nat Budin, "Styles of Larp," *Alleged Entertainment*, March 8, 2015, http://blog.aegames.org/2015/03/styles-of-larp.html.

17. Torner and Jones.

18. Lizzie Stark, "Jeepform for Noobs," *Leaving Mundania*, September 17, 2012, http://leavingmundania.com/2012/09/17/jeepform-for-noobs/.

19. Lizzie Stark, "Introducing American Freeform," *Leaving Mundania*, November 18, 2013, http://leavingmundania.com/2013/11/18/introducing-american-freeform/.

Nat Budin *got his start in theatre-style larp in 2002 at Brandeis University. He has served as con chair for Intercon I in 2009 and is currently con chair for the upcoming Intercon P. He also founded Brandeis's Festival of the LARPs and co-founded Alleged Entertainment, with which he has written and run over a dozen original theatre-style larps. Nat also created and maintains several web-based tools for larp creation and management, including Journey Surveys, Vellum, and ConCentral. Nat's writing about larp has been published in the Wyrd Con Companion Book and Game Wrap.*

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How I Became an Accidental Artist Through Larp

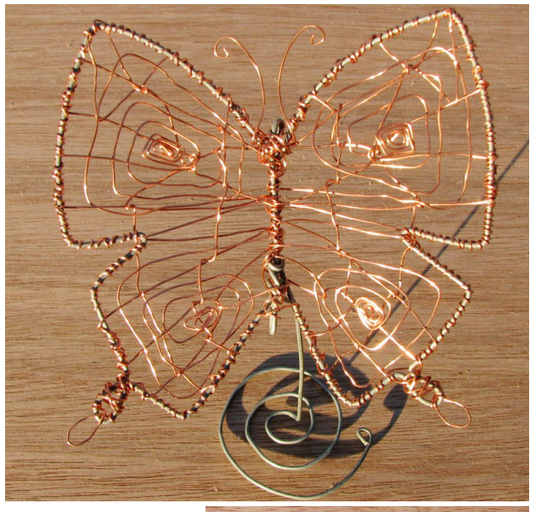
Quinn D

While much has been written about how larp can be immersive or how larp can be art, instead, this essay sets out to illustrate an example of how the inclusion of artistic sculptures created for game had a powerful emotional effect on other players, as well as a wholly unexpected transformative experience for myself as the player. While the pieces were created merely as props, and not as artistic expression, they brought something ethereal and powerful to in-game character interactions. I will explain how the in-character and out-of-character emotion that was created arose and supported players' game experiences through this example.

This example also serves to present the case of a parallel evolution for the character and player creator about simply being an artist. The character did not feel herself skilled and, over several years, grew to understand the power of her works on other people and cherishing the work. I, as the player who knew very little about art, did not originally consider myself to be creating works of art, nor consider myself an artist; instead, I was simply creating props. It was through the powerful emotional moments the sculptures helped create and the admiration of other players that I also came to accept that these were artistic expressions, with some merit, and that in some way, I am an artist. This parallel evolution caused positive *bleed-out* for me as a player, as well as out-of-character personal development as a direct result of this role-play. Neither of these aspects were originally sought or intended by my participation, illustrating how larp can affect a player in ways one does not expect or set out to explore.

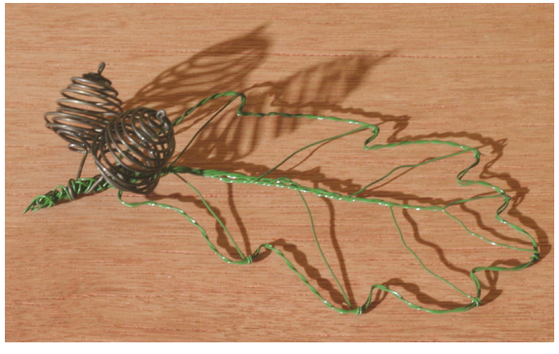
Gateway: Eventide and Ariela the Artist

In 2010, some members of a larp community in the Chicago area were starting up a campaign game titled *Gateway: Eventide*. The game ended up running for four years with generally about 35 to 45 players present. Written and run by a team including Rob Wilson, David Simkins, Steve Vig, and several others at a couple private homes, I knew that the staff usually ran the sort of games I enjoyed. Most of the writers and anticipated players I had previously met through playing one-shot games. My experience at the time was limited to such games and other similarly structured larps run at the Intercon conventions. These games had low levels of mechanics and were plot and interconnection heavy, with all pre-generated and cast characters. The usual four hour one-shot events were comfortable to me, knowing that I was going into the event with enough material for the time frame. Because of this background, the idea of a game where I was going to play the same character for five or six hours each session for twenty-five sessions was a little daunting and I was very unsure about joining. The thing that I had always liked about one-shot events where the characters were all pre-written and assigned to players was that there were built-in connections, relationships, and purposes. But I knew and trusted the people running it to support the play style I liked, with strong immersion into their characters and all players expected to remain in-character the entire event.



Top: Thinking of a peaceful spring afternoon, Ariela created this sculpture, trying for the beauty of the simple butterfly: free and happy, without the troubles she had in her life. The butterfly expresses beauty, simplicity, freedom, and happiness.

Bottom: A commissioned piece, created for Lord Quinlen Barimen. It is the symbol of his military company.



Top: The soldier holds his sword up in the air triumphantly as several people Ariela knew had done.

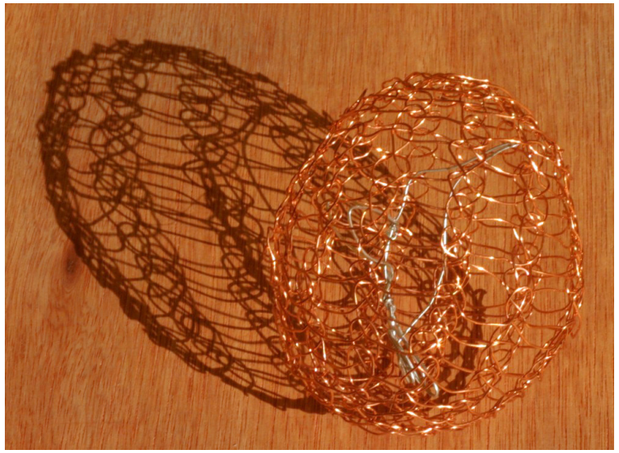
Bottom: Ariela made this leaf and acorns, inspired by a trip to Carn's home. The link to Thallerin was seen by Pietre, who gave it to his good friend from there, Arya, who wore it on a chain for many a day after.

Gateway: Eventide had medieval fantasy setting. It took place at the Ram's Head Tavern, a magical place that appeared every other month and offered the ability to temporarily open doorways to other places and times. The world of Kaleth was split into several duchies, with the Ram's Head appearing in different places each time. Through the campaign, the politics of the lands and many stories were played out in the tavern and through its doorways. It was in this world that I needed to fit a character.

It took a lot of brainstorming to come up with a character idea that I thought would be fun to play in this world setting. At the time, much like today, my interest in larp was to experience other people's lives through role-play, with particular focus on more intense situations and realities. After working with the writers a bit, it was agreed that my original character idea would not work in a campaign and become a problem. After a couple games, we were able to work together to come up with a character concept I thought would be rewarding. I had great opportunity to be able to get into the headspace and try to experience some really intense attributes and a reality of living that was quite different than I had been able to play before.

Ariela grew up in a remote area raised by her parents until unidentified soldiers attacked her home, burning it down and killing her parents when she was just eight. While she escaped the attack, she was found by a pair of travelers who promised to take care of her, but actually sold her to the captain of a pirate ship. She spent nine years on that ship, then another ship doing grueling labor while the crews mistreated her. These years changed her from a happy child to a fearful, meek young woman who was afraid to speak and never looked anyone in the eyes. Isolated and constantly mocked, she did not see any value to herself as a person. She was eventually taken from the pirates by a woman from an enslaved race who treated her kindly, and a year later, brought her to the Ram's Head Tavern.

I was really excited to play Ariela in the game, but David, one of the writers, requested that my character be a natural artist. I understood the reasoning behind the request, even though I never would have thought of it on my own. Ariela started the game as a near nobody, an unsure-of-herself, poor peasant amidst a sea of seemingly important people. She had few connections to other characters, and seemingly few reasons for others to talk to her. Creating artwork served to place her as a seller in the community, with the game having attempted to set up an economy with many other characters interested



Clockwise from top: Rialla blood horse, a very dark memory from Ariela's childhood, as it was this type of horse that was used by soldiers to destroy her home and kill her parents. This memory was the start of many dark days for her.

This lantern was created as a symbol for members of the Ram's Head. There was so much turmoil at the time and so little certainty of where things should go that Ariela wanted to lend some light.

An Egg, hard on the outside, yet, here is a gentle hummingbird flying inside. Ariela was thinking of several people she met when she made this, but most of all Leanna, who always showed the world her strong shell, but Ariela knew that she was really the soft creature inside.

Created as a thing of beauty and wonder, this Kaleidoscope shows the viewer a fractured field of color and light.

in purchasing things and a couple sellers. David wrote to me, "Is the art angle ok? It means you can make art in game. There are item cards, but props (with items cards attached) are ideal. If art is ok, is there a kind of art or a couple kinds of art you would like to pursue? Things you/we can prop for would be excellent."

So we wrote in this angle. Ariela would have a natural skill as an artist, but she did not recognize or value it at the start of the game. The one little problem was that I really had no experience in any sort of artwork or even crafting and, furthermore, I did not see myself as good at any of it.

Wire Sculptures

In brainstorming types of art, I was looking for something that was easy, pretty quick to put together, relatively inexpensive, and plausibly period appropriate for the medieval fantasy setting. Because of the economy that was set up, the objects really needed to be able to have recognizable meaning, so I needed something with flexibility to convey a wide variety of symbolism as well. I also knew that I would have to keep up with a substantial flow of sculptures to make this characteristic meaningful.

The best option I could come up with was wire sculpture. I had never done sculpture before aside from Playdoh as a child. Though I have seen a lot of wirework at SCA events—medieval through Renaissance period reenacting—I could not confirm if it was period appropriate as a sculpture medium, but at least it used mostly period materials and tools. Making liberal use of Google images, I looked at many examples: things people were doing, styles, techniques, and for general inspiration. I messed around and made something, then another, and another. It got easier, I got more skilled, and had a lot of fun with it. For the first couple years, I made between two and five sculptures per game. By the end, I had made over 40 pieces. At the three year mark, things in-game had evolved for my character and I had less free time to make them, so I really did not make any more for the game. From the beginning, the sculptures had item cards associated with them to support the in-game economy, so when I stopped making the sculptures, I simply used the cards to continue to support the game's mechanical needs.

Affecting the Game, the Players and Myself

These props had a huge effect functionally in-game beyond just item cards. It was actually easy to draw characters in to show them items I had made. I was able to talk to other characters about their stories and take commissions for things that were important to them. Many of the sculptures were indeed commissions, relating to the stories of other characters that I learned about in-game, such as the winged sword created for Lord Quinlen Barimen, the captain of a military company. It was in these interactions that I had an excuse and an ability to portray my character and become more linked to the game. I am sure I could have had some of this if I only had item cards, but I do not think it would have been nearly as effective. The cards would have been fine for the players who were mostly interested in the economy or mechanics aspects, but probably not nearly as effective with the players who were more character and emotion driven. Bring more characterization and emotion driven in play style myself, I understood that well. The sculptures were more than just a tool to support engagement, there was just something uniquely special about unwrapping a creation and the person first setting eyes on it that flipping through a set of cards and pulling one out did not have.

I think they had an effect on some of the players too. In a number of cases, I was able to give them more immersion of being amazed and in real appreciation of the objects in a way item cards never would have done. I did not ask if it was character portrayal or real player reactions, but it was not uncommon for another immersive player to show that real emotion upon being shown a new creation in game for the first time. Either way, the art was a success because not only did this enhance my own immersion, it enhanced the immersion for other players.

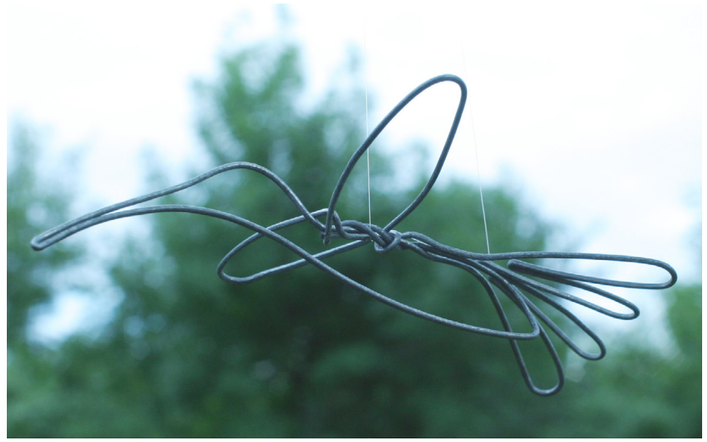
Wire was easy and cheap to get at the hardware store, though only in limited finishes. As time progressed, I started using more and more of the craft wire for variety, despite the cost and less period appropriateness. Sometimes the sculptures arose purely out of my head, but other times I used references for inspiration. In only one situation did I directly copy something I saw, though I added details to it. In many cases, I found it helpful to learn about shapes and lines of an image through people's simple pencil drawings online. The deconstructed nature and obvious image despite minimal details helped my engineer mind to see the core shapes and learn how to mimic them within the limitations of the media I was using. No, I had no training in art of any sort, so was learning basic concepts in the very engineering manner to which I was accustomed. In a couple cases, such as the Rialla blood horse and the bird, I printed out a drawing and literally traced out the image, bending the wire and aligning it to the picture much as is done by neon sign makers. Though even in these situations, I was altering and extending the shapes to be three-dimensional or other characteristics I wanted in the resulting sculpture.

When I started this larp, the sculptures were just props to me. Certainly I liked making them, because I just naturally like creating and making things with my hands, no matter the media, but to me they were not art. I had never been an art aficionado and did not really understand art. I had always liked looking at a lot of artwork for imagery, for beauty, and in appreciation for the skill in creation, but I never had a core feeling of being an art lover or even understanding it in the way so many others seem to do. I did not set out to create art and I never thought that was what I was doing, as I just saw crudeness and issues with the things I made. To me, they were mostly just simple creations I made with my hands, pliers, wire cutters, and a little time.

But something changed along the way, something I did not realize until afterwards, when the game was nearing an end. I am still not completely sure how it changed, but I know that people's reactions were part of it. The way a number of people regarded some of the pieces and told me about their appreciation was also certainly part of it. The Egg and the Kaleidoscope were among the ones that drew these reactions, but many were significant to others, and by more than just in-game characters, players were telling me as well.

At one point, I had a number of sculptures sitting around the house that had left the game due to in-game reasons. I was struck when my partner insisted that they should be in the display case along with other special items. This was not just a display case that we both had things in; no, this was her display case with her special items. Several players were asking if they could keep some of them, and had a true look of joy when I told them that I would be happy for them to have them. I know that quite a few are sitting on people's mantles and shelves so they can be seen.

The Kaleidoscope (at left) was interesting in and of itself because it meant so much to my partner out-of-character that she really wanted to keep it, having told me so when it was still being made. She had suggested making it and I had asked her for some assistance on it. I knew that she would be truly upset if it ended up with someone else. Many of the other characters I could tell were in awe by it and actively pushed others to come see it. I was proud of how it turned out with regard to technique in bending, cutting, and polishing the sheet copper, but it was not until later that I came to appreciate its appearance as well. The same thing happened with the Egg (at left).



Clockwise from top left: Ariela wanted to create something that symbolized someone special to her. It was a challenging task as she is a very complicated woman. In this sculpture, Ariela represents herself as a child, holding the woman's hand as if she was a mother. The woman stands on top of a hill, as if speaking to and leading her people below.

This simple hummingbird was one of the first things Ariela made, as an expression of freedom when she had none.

This image of a mother holding her child with a sword at her ready was felt by Ariela to be symbolic of Arya, who was strong and, at the same time, caring. It is said there is a much deeper meaning that Ariela knew about Arya, but choose not to share publicly.

Early on in the campaign, there was uncertainty about the future of the game world and what the doorways from the Ram's Head meant for it. While Ariela did not see herself as a person with the power to influence politics or the future, she did see that uncertainty in those around her who had that power and wanted to offer comfort them. The lantern was created as a symbol to show others that all was not darkness and to give hope of finding the way. The amount it helped the other characters is unclear to me, but it certainly was a focus for Ariela that she shared and brought her comfort by feeling useful.

The Egg was one of the pieces I was inspired to make and created as my own idea. More to the point, it was one that was created around a specific statement. I was putting strong meaning and a message into it. One of the characters, Leanna, was a strong noble, who would show the world around her exactly what she wanted, and nothing more. Class differences meant that Leanna should not have been interacting much with a peasant like Ariela, but the sculptures drew her in. Ariela did not understand, but Leanna seemed to have some internal feelings of care for Ariela, that Leanna tried to shut away. Ariela saw this, and bits of Leanna's emotions about her separated daughter. The egg was created to show how Ariela saw Leanna. The shell symbolized that hard, strong outside that Leanna showed the world, but inside, a fragile little hummingbird flapping its wings, working so hard to stay in the air. Ariela could see through the shell, as could the person looking at the sculpture. When Leanna saw it for the first time, she was taken, I think, first by its beauty, and later on by its meaning, leaving her speechless for a time. There was real wonder in her eyes, real emotion. Was what I was seeing the character? The player? I am not sure, but it was there.

The two-figure sculpture (top left) was on a more personal character note. Ariela started as a very down trodden young woman, but she did have one key connection with Ela-Ara, a leader from an enslaved race trying to free her people. Abducted after the loss of her parents when she was eight, Ariela spent her teenage years isolated as a forced servant on a pirate ship. It was Ela-Ara who took Ariela from the pirates, kept her safe and took care of her, despite having no apparent reason for doing so. Ela-Ara was the only person in the world that Ariela had at the time. I wanted to make something to bring into the game that Ariela could give to Ela-Ara and put together some symbolism of how the two of them related and how her people related to her. To Ariela, she was a mother; to her people, a leader. I was still thinking of it as a prop to trigger emotions and a scene in the game, so did not tell the other player about it beforehand. We are both emotive, immersive players, but the reaction I saw from her took me aback. She is an excellent player, always showing her character, but at that moment I could see feeling in her, not just her character.

The hummingbird (near left) was a sculpture that, while crude and simple, served as a focus twice in the game. It was not created until several years into the campaign, but was created as a prop representing one of the first things Ariela had created from when she was aboard the pirate ships. For game story reasons, the lost sculpture reappeared to her during a game session and served to highlight the difference from where her life had been in the past to how much she had grown since then. At this point, Ariela was highly regarded as an artist, and politically very influential, making such a crude piece so notable.

At a later point, the hummingbird was used symbolically in a private scene with Raja, with whom Ariela had grown a powerful friendship. Ariela used it to symbolically give up on some of the burdens she carried with her. Those dark times of her childhood long weighed heavily on her, and in giving this symbol of all those burdens for Raja to carry, it helped Ariela move on. In that scene, Ariela also took a burden from Raja. So this single piece served as a reflection of how she had grown, a symbol of her past, and a support bond with another player-character.

Things had changed; these were not always just props, or even art. Sometimes they were story, experiences, and feeling too.

Something changed in me about what I wanted to happen with the sculptures too. All along, I told players that they could keep the props—which is what I regarded them as at the time—if they wanted, but to return them at the end if they were just going to discard them. I just did not want them to go into the trash. But as I was figuring all of this out, I realized that I actually cared about the pieces. I wanted to know that they had good homes with people who would appreciate them, the memories, and the stories. It was much more than just not wanting a thing to go to waste; it was wanting them to be appreciated. At the end of the campaign, I went back and asked everyone what items they had and if they wanted to keep them. Nearly everyone who responded did want to keep them. More so, I was hearing bits of the story around the items from their perspective and their character's. To have so many players actively want and appreciate them made me quite happy: happy that I had made something they liked, and happy that I could bring that bit of joy or memory to them.

Looking Back at It All

- Does people wanting to put works on display make them art? Does the happiness people had when getting a piece make it art?
- Does the wonder and appreciation in people's eyes when they pick it up and look at it make it art?
- Does eliciting emotion make it art?
- Does being filled with symbolism and meaning make it art?
- Does caring where your creations end up make it art? Do the memories and meaning of them make it art?

I do not know the answers to any of those questions. If it is art, I certainly do not know if it makes me an art-

ist. I mean, I made these pieces, and they had these effects, in-game and out-of-game. What I do know is that I played an artist; I was unexpectedly immersed, I felt it, and I am taking something out of the game and into real life because of it. Ariela started her life not an artist and I started the game the same way. As Ariela came to accept in-game that her work had value from people purchasing it and being moved by it, I came to accept that in some fashion, I was an artist, and people valued what I created. We both created objects that moved people—objects with meaning and beauty.

Some people regard larp as imaginary, as pretend, as just a bit of fun. But is that all it is? Do we as players not take anything away: new experiences, new feelings, new memories, and sometimes even new skills? I did not expect any of this going into the game, but I did end up with bleed-out: aspects of the game and my character leaving the game and becoming a part of me. This is bleed that I am happy to take with me, bleed that I think makes me a better person. I think things like this experience can point to why larp can be so much more than just a game if the right environment is set up and a player is willing to explore. Through role-play, I explored the character I was playing, but I was also exploring myself, even if I didn't know it. Larp can move us in many ways if we just keep ourselves open to it.

In the end, I am happy to have brought happiness and good memories to so many of my friends. I am happy that people enjoy the sculptures and I hope that persists for a long time. No matter how much of this sort of thing I do in the future or not, I will always remember the experience: the unplanned immersion into being an artist. That is what larp is for me: a chance to play out something one is not. Sometimes one can come out of a game with a new part of oneself, and though I certainly did not expect it, in this case, I did.

You can view a full gallery of the sculptures here on Facebook.

Quinn D *is an electrical engineer who writes, runs and plays in larp events, as well as a staff member at the Intercon larp convention. Quinn's focus in larp is character immersion. It is through role-play that Quinn seeks to learn, understand, and experience small parts of the many possible different lived experiences in the world around us. Quinn considers larp to be a very special format for doing so in a way that is both visceral and safe.*

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Writing Game Economies for Larp

Rob McDiarmid

Currencies have been a part of the role-playing game landscape at least since the first Fighting Man rifled through the pockets of the first Kobold for a few copper pieces back in 1970-something. In more recent computer games, some players spend hours of their life mining virtual metals to craft into virtual armor for their virtual characters living in their virtual worlds. Game economies can be a significant part of the player experience; drive player interactions and story; and add to the sense of being part of a dynamic living world.

The purpose of this article is to describe what a larp designer should do if they want to make their game economy a central part of their game, around which a significant amount of game play will be focused. Of course, making the game economy a central feature does not always fit with a game's design goals. Many games prefer to keep their focus on other elements. But for some games, a robust game economy can be a good fit. This article will describe the potential benefits of a robust and well-designed game economy, introducing many of the ideas a designer should address in order to create one.

Finding the Fun in Game Economies

Arguably, the first question to answer before designing a game economy is: what you want the economy to accomplish within the game? Depending on how it is constructed, a game economy can provide any or all of the following:

- **Drive interactions between players:** Economy-based pursuits give players reasons to interact with each other, including providing reasons to interact with unfamiliar or even unfriendly characters. They will do so dynamically without direct intercession from the game masters (GMs) during the event.

- **Provide self-created character goals:** Players can create, pursue, and fulfill goals for themselves within the game economy, again with minimal or no GM intervention during the event.

- **Provide non-linear character rewards:** These are rewards that are given differently to different characters, as opposed to experience point rewards, which are commonly given out based purely on time and attendance. Having these kinds of rewards in the game means that players who work hard at the game economy get more out of it, which can increase engagement for some players. It should be noted, however, that unevenly distributed rewards may be considered less fair and less fun for some players. Sometimes game economy rewards can be seen as not being awarded proportionately to risk, as those who constantly busy themselves with killing monsters may not be taking the time to loot monsters, craft goods, or perform other actions that make their characters more wealthy. This is especially noticeable to players who play a lot of video games, which often are better able to reward characters accurately based on fighting and completing quests. It could be argued, on the other hand, that such discrepancies make excellent topics for characters about which to argue in-game, which makes for solid, interesting game content.

- **Provide opportunities for certain character types:** Certain types of characters only work when the game has a robust economy. Crafters can only be meaningful characters if there are needed things to craft. Merchants can only feel like they are actually playing merchants if there is meaningful trade to conduct and prices to haggle over. Thieves can only steal if there are useful goods to be stolen.

- **Give characters a meaningful way to be nice:** Characters who are generous and charitable have the opportunity to express those character traits by giving money and items to characters in need. The staff can provide non-player-characters (NPCs) who are in need of help and players can give them useful goods. The more the players actually need those goods themselves, the more meaningful it is when they choose to give them away instead.

- **Give characters a meaningful way to be mean:** Characters who are mean and greedy can express those traits through the economy by hoarding certain goods, attempting to undercut other characters in meeting their goals, or perhaps even stealing another character's things. This ability can drive tension in a way that is often fun for the players and allows them to be at odds with each other's characters without the players themselves getting upset.

- **Drive political interactions**: When interactions like theft become more meaningful in a game with a robust economy, laws and punishment for such crimes becomes more meaningful. A strong economy gives weight to punishments other than direct harm, such as fines or perhaps indentured servitude. Also, the clbusters of characters that form around efficiently filling economic needs often become political factions that drive dramatic gameplay.

- **Give characters a meaningful way to be prestigious:** Characters who are rich and powerful can express their influence through the economy by displaying expensive items, locations, and other luxury goods. The staff can provide NPCs to whom the character can give gifts or otherwise influence through their wealth. Also, in a game where wealth is both important and a challenge to acquire, having bountiful amounts is sure to impress the other players.

- **Alternate solutions to problems:** In many role-playing games, the vast majority of problems can be solved by either killing something, resolving a puzzle, or diplomacy. A robust game economy can provide other solutions, such as: crafting a special item, which can include tasks like procuring the resources, obtaining the recipe/blueprint/etc., and crafting the item while under pressure; convincing a group of players to pool their needed resources toward a common goal; bribing an enemy; buying up a certain good to corner the market; hiring assassins; hiring guards; and other economic solutions. It should be noted that sometimes the opportunity to buy out of a fun piece of game content can be a potential downside to a strong game economy when a rich character solves a problem that was intended to be fun for several other characters. However, careful event design and some community management—coaching players to identify and avoid ruining such encounters—can help keep such problems from becoming too rampant.

- **Make the game world feel real**: When characters exchange goods and currency during a game, in can increase the sense that the characters are part of a game world that works the way we would expect it to work. That being said, the effort of keeping a character financially solvent does not appeal to all players, many of whom spend most of their week at their jobs working to make ends meet and who would rather their fantasy escape time take less mental effort.

Demand

Demand is what drives economic transactions within a larp. Many larp designers make the mistake of focusing on *supply* first and too often just assume that demand will be present, while not doing anything to make it be present. They create a set of available goods, prices for those goods, perhaps a crafting system for generating those goods—if not, then the goods generally come in to play through NPC merchants—and they might think about how characters are going to acquire the means to purchase those goods. However, they don't stop to think about why the characters want the goods to begin with or how badly they are going to need them in order to survive and thrive. Those are the questions of demand. Not being aware of those questions and answering them satisfactorily in design is arguably the primary reason an economy fails to gain traction and become a significant part of a given game.

In real life, a certain amount of demand can be assumed, because people have fundamental needs for food, shelter, and other basic necessities of life. Meeting these needs drives people to take at least some of the actions that come under the umbrella of a game economy, even if those actions do not result in economic transactions. For example, if you're raising vegetables in your backyard instead of buying them at the store, you're still conducting resource-producing actions that are the equivalent of gathering skills in a game, so you're doing actions that would count as "engaging with the economy."

In a larp, most of these fundamental needs are usually skipped, because tracking such details tends to require a lot of logistics with minimal payoff in fun. On the other hand, most games include a much higher level of threat than is seen in real life; zombies, monsters, enemy armies, and other dangers are often a common feature that create other needs such as combat prowess and healing. However, in many of the games I have played, the inherent abilities that a player is able to obtain through experience points are sufficient

to combat the threat, either within their own abilities or the abilities of other players. Therefore, they are not experiencing a need and there is nothing driving fundamental demand. If the players have no needs that are not being met outside the game economy, they have the option not to engage with the game economy. When too many players opt out of the game economy, it tends to become a side venture in which a handful of players participate, rather than a rich, driving part of the play experience.

For some additional terminology, demand is made up of two parts: *desire* and *means*.[1] The potential purchaser must have the desire to purchase the item and the means to do so, i.e. enough money, barter, other things of value to trade. There are two types of desire: *wants* and *needs*. Needs are the things you need for basic survival and comfort. Wants are the things you desire for luxury, vanity, power, etc. Other terms for this distinction are *high utility* and *low utility*, but for ease of discussion, I will use wants and needs.

The easiest way for the game designer to affect the level of impact the game economy has on the game as a whole is by designing the rest of the game system to generate more needs. If characters are, by default, stable and well taken care of, then they have few needs. This is the case in many designs. If your weapon doesn't break, you generally have plenty of energy points to do your special effects in each fight, and the monsters you face are generally well scaled to your power level, then you have few needs that cannot be met though inherent abilities bought through XP and are always available.

However, if the things you fight are tough and deadly, and the best way to improve your ability to fight them is to buy a better weapon rather than rely on a special power that improves your combat prowess, then obtaining a better weapon goes from a want to a need. If you are constantly short of energy points and the only way to get more is to buy potions to replenish your energy, then obtaining more potions becomes a need. If monsters often use break effects and the only way to get your weapon working again is to have another player use a repair ability, which itself is an ability with scarcity, then repairs become a need. When there are many needs that can best be filled through the economy, then there is demand and transactions happen.

1. Business Dictionary, "Demand," *Business Dictionary*, last accessed November 10, 2015. http://www.businessdictionary.com/.

In many role-playing games, the vast majority of problems can be solved by either killing something, resolving a puzzle, or diplomacy. A robust game economy can provide other solutions.

It should be noted, for sake of completeness, that some goods become less needed once you have one. For example, you need food, but once you have bought and eaten a hamburger, you don't need another one right then. Economists call this *diminishing marginal utility* and it is something to keep in mind when analyzing a game economy, because it will affect the overall transaction rates and flow of wealth. However, the problem that many games face is that their characters never get hungry to begin with or have any other needs that can be best met through the game economy. The hamburgers that the designer has made available have no real value, and the player doesn't care whether or not they ever get one. Therefore, the most important thing the designer can do if they want the game economy to be important in their game is to create needs that can best be met through the economy.

Creating Needs

Two common game economy terms are *sinks* and *faucets*. Faucets are sources of wealth and goods, such as gathering skills, monster loot, and other means by which more wealth is introduced into the economy. Sinks are the drains by which wealth leaves the economy. When a potion is consumed, when a unit of iron is spent to repair armor, when a bomb is exploded to kill a bad guy, wealth is removed from the game economy. A lot of time is spent examining the sinks and faucets[2] of online games in order to see how they balance out to prevent problems like inflation. I will discuss that balancing act later when I look at tweaking the economy in play.

However, before an economy can be tweaked and balanced, it needs to be made significant in the first place. As I have said, many larps are designed in a way that leaves characters free to opt out from participating in the economy because most of the characters' needs can be met through the stats and powers available from experience points. The following, then, are techniques to use when designing a larp system when you want to make the economy important and not optional:

- **Limit the basics:** In most live combat larps, the fundamental needs of food, shelter, and so on are replaced by the need for combat prowess and healing. The ability of characters to perform healing or activate their special abilities is often limited by one or more forms of energy points that are spent when these abilities are activated. If the designer makes it so that the amount of energy points available is less than the players would like and provides opportunities to obtain more through gear and consumables, this method is often the most important way to drive the game economy.

2. John Scott Tynes, "Faucets, Sinks, and Markets," *The Escapist*, January 7, 2010, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/columns/the-hard-problem/6983-Faucets-Sinks-and-Markets.

- **Emphasize gear power over skill power:** In order to emphasize the game economy, it is important to carve out a power space that can be filled far more effectively though the economy than through character skills. For example, increasing weapon damage can be a skill power that costs a lot of energy points, but if they buy a better weapon, they get increased damage that lasts until the weapon is broken, stolen, expires, or perhaps they have the ability to use their character skill at a reduced cost, which means only characters with that skill can benefit from the weapon.

- **Upkeep/repairs/item expiration dates:** An issue that many games experience is an eventual glut of permanent items that results in an eventual reduction of need within the player base as a whole. This issue can be countered by making sure that the item eventually expires and is exited out of the economy, requiring continual production. Also, ongoing cost of ownership can be implemented; armor and weapons can require resources when they are repaired after a fight, or a piece of gear that gives the user a special power can consume a resource every time it is used.

- **Emphasize consumables over permanent upgrades:** Consumables—like potions, drugs, one-shot attack items, and other such goods—require continual use of resources to exist. Making most special abilities either impossible to acquire permanently or less costly to acquire as one-shot items encourages continual production and needs. Also, when permanent items do exist that give powerful special abilities, those items can have some sort of fuel cost or energy point cost that can reduce their usefulness in comparison to consumables.

- **Reduce access to defenses and immunities to special effects:** In some games, special effects like Break Weapon are easy to avoid because it is so easy to use the plentiful defensive abilities that counter them. Making these defenses rare and expensive—not just in one-time experience points, but in ongoing costs, like energy point costs—reduces the number of times those defenses are successfully used. As a side effect, for effects like weapon breaks, this process increases the number of weapons that are broken and thereby increases the need of players to seek repairs. Also, it should be noted that reduced defenses mean that special effects are much more likely to be successful when they are used, which tends to be much more fun for the person using them. Players often find it discouraging when their special powers are defended against most of the time rather than being successful.

Supply

Supply is, essentially, the ability to bring goods to market. In pure macroeconomics terms, supply is the amount of product that firms are willing to bring to market given the price. However, it is easier for most laymen to flip the concept around and see it as the amount of goods available driving the price. Since larp economies operate at small scales without perfect communication or the other factors of perfect competition that basic macroeconomics models assume, it's more meaningful to think about it that way anyway.

Many larps have a significant number of supply-oriented skills. They may have many or all of the following:

- Income skills that give straight currency, usually a set amount per event.
- Gathering skills that generate components.
- Refining skills that turn raw components into usable components for crafting. This layer is the most often skipped.
- Crafting skills that turn components into finished goods.
- Enhancement skills that permanently turn finished goods into better finished goods.
- Trading skills that allow for automatic trades that happen off-screen, which can include introducing goods at a price that allows for reselling.

In some games, these concepts exist as discrete actions, but do not require separate skills. For example, in *Dystopia Rising*, some crafting recipes are for advanced components that are not usable by themselves, but are used in other crafting recipes. Therefore, these recipes act as a refining step without having separate skills that are specific to a refining step.

Costs/Resources

When people think of economies, they often think about currency and the items bought with it. But currency is far from the only resource involved in an economy. Thinking about all the different, interacting resources involved can help a designer analyze their game economy more clearly.

- **Cash:** Currency is often included by default because most designers assume that an economy means currency will be involved. This is not always necessary, but I will discuss that in detail later. Some games remove item resources altogether and just use cash as a way to obtain or improve finished goods. Sometimes cash is required to generate either components or finished goods as a way of sucking cash out of the economy during crafting.
- **Event Time:** Within a given game event, usually the start time and end time are fixed, or nearly so. Time is commonly used as a resource; if it takes 20 minutes to mine 1 unit of ore, then at most, one can generate 3 ore per hour, which allows the designer to analyze the theoretical maximum output of the miner during the course of the game.
  - **Passive Time vs. Active Time:** Passive time allocation means that the player has allocated the time to an action, and cannot perform any other game mechanic actions during that time, but can still socialize as their character. Active time means that the character must not only allocate the time, but must actively be pretending to work on the activity during that time. Most games use active time allocation. However, this requirement can sometimes be seen as overly cumbersome for the players. Pretending to meditate for 30 minutes at a time repeatedly during a game means spending an awfully large amount of the event time not interacting with the other players, which can be dreadfully boring. Some games allow players to choose between active and passive time allocation. If the player chooses passive time allocation, they must allocate the entire 30 minutes to meditating, but if they choose to actively perform the meditation, they may finish in 15 minutes or perhaps less. This can help avoid player boredom. However, forcing active time allocation can create more opportunities for interruption and can lead to player interactions such as paying guards.
- **Post-Event Time:** In some systems, players are given slots of time between games that can be allocated toward gathering components, crafting components into goods, or otherwise performing economic actions. In some games, these replace event time actions completely, while in others, they supplement event time actions. It should be noted that using post-event time as a resource does not directly engage the benefit of having an economy drive in-game interactions with PCs and NPCs. However, moving some more boring activities off-screen can allow players to focus on more interesting parts like actual trading.
- **Regenerating resources:** Things like energy points are often self-regenerating. The rate of regeneration and the expense of purchasing the pool of points determines how much of a limited resource these are. If energy points are made to regenerate more slowly than players would prefer, that can create a space for goods like consumable energy potions to be important.
- **Consumable components:** These are often things like herbs and metals that are being turned into the finished product and are therefore consumed in the process. These are generally the core resources of a crafting economy.
- **Skill/Gear Limits:** Often, there are skill or gear limits that keep just anyone from being the producer of the finished goods.

Distributing Resources and Vertical Monopolies

Vertical integration is the extent to which one company—in a larp, we will consider this a single character—can produce all the components and other resources they need and then produce finished goods with those resources. If they can complete the supply chain from end to end, from component collection, to crafting, and all the way to sales, then they are said to have a *vertical monopoly*.

In a real economy, people have needs and wants for so many different things that vertical monopolies are a good way to produce goods efficiently. In a larp economy, however, characters usually only need a handful of main goods—weapons, armor, and a few other things—so vertical monopolies greatly reduce the number of characters interacting with the game economy in a meaningful way. If a crafter is able to generate all the resources and recipes they need, as well as craft the goods, then only one transaction takes place between players, where many transactions could have been possible.

Sometimes, a pattern even emerges where PCs never establish relationships with PC crafters, and instead slowly save up cash to buy what they need from NPC merchants. This issue happens because players are distrustful of other PC characters and assume that NPC merchants are operating under constraints that will force them to price things fairly, while PC characters may gouge the other players without them knowing what is reasonable. At the very least, the PC purchasers may not want to enrich other PCs while meeting their needs. When components are being generated by the same crafters that are using them, this process tends to enhance this stratifying effect, and the crafters also do most of their selling to NPC merchants.

By distributing resources broadly among the player base in a way that crafters have a hard time generating the resources that they need to ply their trade on their own, crafters seek out other characters to provide them with resources and non-crafting component generators seek out crafters in order to trade. This helps to establish a game economy based on player crafting instead of NPC merchants.

There are some things a designer can do to help ensure that the inflow of crafting resources is distributed across the player base so that more characters can effectively participate in the game economy:

- **Inexpensive gathering skills:** If gathering skills cost a lot of experience points before they are useful, then fewer players will be willing to overcome the cost of entry into gathering. Gathering skills are often structured so that they have another cost anyway—e.g. energy point cost, downtime action cost, play time cost, etc.—so it might be worth considering reducing gathering skill costs. If gathering skills are cheap, doesn't that increase the likelihood of a vertical monopoly? It does; however, if the other costs of generating components—play time, energy points, etc.—are significant and of the same type as the crafting skills, then it often becomes far more efficient for non-crafters to do gathering and for the crafters to focus their limited time/energy/etc. on crafting finished goods.

- **Gathering classes/professions:** In a game that uses classes or professions, many times, the designer groups the gathering skills and crafting skills into the same class. Separating these skills, so that one character is, for example, a miner while another is a blacksmith, means that one will be generating components while the other is creating finished goods.

- **Unskilled gathering:** Characters can be given the ability to do some forms of gathering without any experience point cost at all. Perhaps there are other requirements instead of skill, such as a gathering item—like a wood axe, or a scythe—that must be crafted and used in order to allow the component to be gathered. Perhaps an in-game building, like a mine shaft or a mill, must be built in order to allow characters to spend time creating the component. Unskilled gathering allows all characters to participate in generating components and obtaining the means to conduct trade.

- **Component loot:** In most video games, monsters and bad guys tend to drop currency loot when they die. The same kind of thing works in larp. However, if there is a crafting economy, dropping cash sometimes results in characters saving up and buying directly from NPC merchants instead of from players because players don't trust other player characters to give them a square deal and don't want to enrich other players by buying from them. If, however, opponents tend to drop crafting components more often than cash, then players end up with items that they cannot make use of directly. This feature encourages players to begin trading with each other, which establishes trade relationships between player-characters. Also, dropping components instead of dropping currency means that not as many currency sinks are required to avoid inflation.

- **Helper points:** Many games have some sort of helper point system, where players can earn points by donating things needed by the game or doing extra volunteer actions above the expected. Players often can turn in these points for additional components that the player can trade as their character. This process can help characters with skill builds that are especially focused away from the game economy still have a way to gather components and interact with crafters.

Price

Arguably the most important thing the designer can do when designing a game economy is to not set prices. Haggling for prices is arguably the most interesting economic activity a player can conduct. This feature can be hard to do, because it can be difficult to give an NPC vendor a reasonable price range within which to work. It is far easier to give set values. When setting prices for NPCs to use, they should be treated like a Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price for a car; basically, it's the highest price anyone would expect to pay. It is important to calculate up generously to get to this price:

- **Materials costs:** Start with the upper range of resource cost, but not the most extreme. This should be the *retail cost*: the cost that a player who produces the component would charge a player who wants to craft the component if the producer is trying to make a profit. For example, if making a product requires 4 units of a component that costs between 3 and 5 gold per unit to acquire, then using a material cost of about 4.5 gold per unit, or 18 total gold, is probably about right.

- **Labor costs:** In a meaningful economy, a crafter is not going to sell a finished product for the same amount he spent acquiring the resources to make it. A good rule of thumb is to assume that the crafter is going to add about 50% to 100% of the materials cost to the product cost; this price represents the wholesale cost. The range should represent volume and lead time; the larger the order and the more reasonable the lead time in crafting the products, the lower the per-unit markup will be. Continuing the above, the wholesale cost of the product would be 27-36 gold.

- **Merchant markup:** Again, in a meaningful economy, a merchant is not going to sell goods for the same price paid at wholesale or they would be making no profit. Again, merchant markup is generally about 50% to 100% added to the wholesale cost. The range will represent volume, ease of travel, personal bias—individuals or groups who have been friendly to the merchant in the past, for example—and factors such as character skill. For example, you could potentially have an impressive character skill that got the merchant markup down to 25%, but no merchant would go lower than that unless subjected to mind control. So, continuing the above example, the final range for the product would be between 40 and 72 gold. However, this price represents the full price range of 2 variables, not the price range that all merchants should use.

- **NPC Bargaining:** A good easy way to allow NPCs to bargain with players in a reasonable way is to go through the above steps to generate a wholesale cost plus price range.

For example, let's say our merchant is obtaining their goods at 32 gold per unit. You can give the NPC player the following chart for a price range:

Product	**Longsword**
Wholesale	**32**
+25% (Bargain skill)	**40**
+50% (Great price)	**48**
+100% (Normal price)	**64**

This chart tells the NPC everything they need to know about the value of the product. They know the wholesale price: a merchant's baseline for profit. This price is also what the merchant would be willing to spend for the same kind of product if a player is selling, although they would try to buy for a little less. They know the rock bottom price they would sell to someone with special character skills. They know what would be an excellent price to offer if they want to give a good deal to a favorite customer. Finally, they know the standard price to ask for as a starting point.

Note that the starting price for a merchant's goods is considerably more than what a player-character can afford to create the product for. This is intentional. In fact, it is crucial. It is absolutely vital that the player's characters be able to significantly undercut the pricing by NPC vendors in order to have a player-driven crafting economy. The difference between NPC vendor prices and the price a PC crafter can charge while still making a profit is the motive for PC crafting in the first place. If there is no margin there, players are better off just hoarding cash and buying right from the NPC vendors.

Limits

Abstract components and finished goods can present unrealistic convenience for carrying and hoarding large amounts of game items. When all you need are a few business cards with item descriptions, you can carry around a warehouse full of stuff on your back.

Many games introduce methods for limiting goods in order to keep people from hoarding unrealistic amounts of goods in a tiny pouch.

- **Weight:** Calculating weight for every object, the way a computer game might do, is too burdensome to be practical for a larp. Often weight is only applied to certain goods, like weapons, shields, and other large bulky items. It is common to place a very small limit on how many weighty goods can be carried on a character.

- **Physical representations:** Another approach is to make every object have a physical representation (physrep) attached to it. These do not necessarily need to be full sized—a sheaf of wheat might be represented with a small bundle of raffia—but at least the objects are large enough that if you're carrying 20 or 50 of them around, you need a bag to carry them in, rather than just a pocket.

- **Carrying Bags:** Another approach is to have a designated carry bag that can have a flexible amount of certain types of items in it and which must be separate from bags carrying other things.

Balancing Supply and Demand: Tweaking the Economy in Play

Much of the work for creating a good game economy happens at the systemic, structural level. However, at certain points in an event or a campaign, either too many or too few resources can reduce the positive outcomes of a strong game economy. If the game has both currency and a crafting system, then the levels of components, finished goods, and cash must all be looked at separately to see if they are creating the outcomes desired by the designer.

Indicators of Imbalance

To take the pulse of the game economy, the designer can observe the following indicators:

- **Deaths:** In a game with strong adventure and combat elements, the number of deaths occurring is a good indicator of the health of the game economy, since the primary character needs typically revolve around the availability of healing and combat prowess.

- **Boldness or Timidity:** Death, however, may not always be the best indicator of a starved economy. If characters have way too few resources, they may outright refuse to engage with the more dangerous content that the designers are presenting. A good indicator of a game that is hitting the sweet spot is when the more fragile characters are hiring the stronger fighting characters with game currency to guard them when they go out on a dangerous activity.

- **Charity:** Ideally, when the characters are presented with NPCs whom they can help through economic assistance, this activity should generate an interesting level of struggle to determine how much can reasonably be spared, if any. If the characters are consistently unwilling to part with anything, despite how much pathos the NPCs throw at them, then the economy is probably too poor. If characters carelessly throw money around, then the economy is probably too rich.

- **Theft:** How characters react to theft is also a good indicator of the health of the economy. If resources are too plentiful, player characters tend to care little about theft. This may also be an indicator that the basic needs of the characters are too easily met through inherent powers and that they don't care enough about what the game economy can provide for them.

- **Communism:** If players tend to pool their resources into groups, this issue often indicates problems with the game economy being just a little too poor. If the whole player base repeatedly pools resources into a single group, this may mean that the number of players is too small for an effective game economy to form. Alternately, it may mean that a charismatic leader is pushing the players toward a type of solidarity that makes it difficult for the economy to act as intended. In this case, the designer may want to conference with that player and see if play can be steered back toward the intended feel. If many small communes develop, this development may either mean that the economy is a little too poor, or it may mean that the economy is complicated enough that only a handful of players understand it effectively enough to operate in it. If factions are forming and interacting in interesting ways, this development may not be a problem at all, but it is something to monitor. It may be an indicator that more work needs to be done with new players to give them a sense of how the economy works so that more players can comfortably conduct business.

- **Inflation:** In a very simple game economy where currency enters primarily through monster loot and goods enter primarily through NPC merchants selling gear and consumables, inflation is often an indicator of not enough sinks, like expiring goods, built into the design. Alternately, it may mean that more consumables need to be sold instead of durable gear. In a more complex game economy with currency, components, and finished goods entering and leaving the economy in multiple ways, it may be difficult to effectively monitor inflation. However, if prices stay elevated, the balance of currency, components, and goods entering and leaving should be examined and adjusted.

- **Stagnation:** Deflation is often not the behavior seen as the opposite of inflation. If the amount of economic activity slows down significantly, the designers should look carefully to see if something has changed. This development could indicate that the threat level is too low to drive need, that key components have become unavailable—perhaps due to the players who produced them not attending the game for a while,—or that key crafters are likewise unavailable. Solutions to stagnation may sometimes be different than simple balancing; perhaps an NPC blacksmith needs to show up when all the PC blacksmiths miss a game, though they should probably charge a more for their services than the PC did to encourage the players to fill the gap.

Sinks and Faucets: Re-establishing Balance

Methods for adding more short term resources are pretty obvious: send in monsters with more loot, send in NPC merchants with generous prices, have NPCs that are helped by players give thank you gifts, etc.

Methods for removing resources from a glutted economy are trickier and worth discussing in more detail:

- **Expiration dates:** If old gear items are hanging around in the economy for too long, add expiration dates to everything. That way, gear needs to be re-crafted periodically and those with good gear have an ongoing need to continue to engage with the economy.

- **Soul-linked items:** Another way to remove old items from the economy is to have them permanently linked to a specific character. In a fantasy setting, this feature can be the result of some sort of magical bonding process, while in a sci-fi setting, it can be some sort of DNA link. It should be noted, however, that this kind of technique greatly reduces the potential for thievery between characters and should not be used if that kind of interaction is being emphasized.

- **Plot sinks:** Introduce a problem to the player base where the solution involves using up resources. These are good to use anyway, but when there are too many resources available, cranking up the number of resources required to fix the problem is a good way to take more resources out.

- **More fights with less loot:** If healing and fighting skills use up economy resources, then adding more, tougher fights with less loot reduce the amount available in the economy.

- **High end items:** If a handful of well-established characters are sitting on large wads of cash, high-end luxury items can be made available. It is important to make sure that these items do not compound the problem by generating additional cash for their owners. In his article "Game Economics: Boffer LARP Edition," Brandes Stoddard notes the common problem that high ticket items often enable the purchaser to quickly gain greater levels of wealth, thus increasing disparity and compounding the problem. Therefore, it is important to avoid this problem when designing high end items.[3] In some games, high-end items generate a special currency of influence that can be used to represent the power of being a big mover and shaker in the game world. This process can provide a secondary economy in which high-end players can participate, while reducing their spending cash to a more reasonable amount.

3. Brandes Stoddard, "Game Economics: Boffer LARP Edition" *Harbinger of Doom*. September 27, 2012. http://harbinger-of-doom.blogspot.com/2012/09/game-economics-boffer-larp-edition.html.

Game Currency

Larp designers have some bad habits when it comes to creating currencies. They tend to copy models that they have seen in either computer games or tabletop role-playing games, neither of which have to deal with the same issues that a larp does. The following are common issues that show up in larp currency:

- **Too much range:** In the current United States economy, the smallest thing that a game economy would cover would be, say, a meal worth around $10 and a super fancy mansion is worth around $10 million. This gives us a million to one range of meaningful purchases. This is too much for a larp game economy, especially when the designer is providing props for currency. A better range from the cheapest practical goods to the highest-end luxury expenditures is a thousand to one range. This keeps purchases in the same ballpark of meaningfulness.

- **Too few denominations:** A bad habit exists that stems from *Dungeons & Dragons* of setting denominations of currency in intervals of 10. For example, 10 copper pieces equal 1 silver piece and 10 silver pieces equal 1 gold piece. However, this practice greatly increases the number of coins needed in circulation in order to make change for a transaction. If a player wants to be a barkeep selling drinks for one copper, they must have 9 on hand every time someone tries to pay with a silver piece. Real currencies, however, tend to use coinage increments of around 4 or 5. The most used small units of currency in the US, for example, are pennies, nickels, quarters, dollars, fives, twenties, and hundred. Dimes and tens, which are the most like a 10 interval system, are the least used. This should serve as a clue for designers when creating currency increments.

- **Pure abstraction:** Currency does not need to be purely abstracted. Useable items can be the base of the currency system. In one game I played, the lowest coins were steel instead of copper and were the basic blacksmithing component, as well as being currency. Other useable items can also form currency, such as one-point healing talismans. Using practical goods instead of abstract currency can help ground the economy in its practical application and can provide a built-in currency sink to remove excess coin from the system and prevent inflation.

Ensuring Inefficiency to Increase Fun

Some economists have taken an interest in computer game economies because they have the potential to create an economy far closer to a state of perfect competition[4] than what happens in the real world. Large player bases using a single form of currency, identical products, and a marketplace that is easy to enter and gives perfect information about available prices creates a model that is interesting to study.[5]

However, in larp, real-time player interactions are generally emphasized over the abstract, asynchronous transactions that make perfect competition possible. In fact, encouraging various forms of inefficiency in a larp economy can provide opportunities for interesting forms of economic activity, such as haggling or forming trade groups.

The following are types of inefficiency that can be introduced into a game economy to encourage fun:

- **Imperfect product information:** Many larp games make it difficult for a player to know exactly what they are buying unless they have special skills to analyze the goods. This can allow certain skilled characters to take on the role of an appraiser and give value to that role. However, caution must be exercised in taking this approach too far. If characters are tricked too often, this issue may stifle economic activity more than it adds to it.

- **Imperfect price information:** If a buyer knows exactly what price every seller is willing to sell for, they will always buy for the lowest price unless they have a good reason to do otherwise. However, having a single best choice is boring and avoids opportunities to interact with others. Players should be discouraged from posting prices online or using other means of broadcasting prices too broadly. Making players find out prices by asking around encourages role-playing and makes price variation an interesting element of engaging with the economy.

- **Varied products:** When products are homogeneous, it becomes too easy to determine their prices relative to each other. When there are many products that are similar but subtly different, interesting differences in pricing can occur. For example, if one recipe for a healing potion is produced with a different set of components that are more easily available in different seasons of the year, its price may fluctuate according to the supply of the components available. When creating varied products, the most important thing is to not create one obvious best product; otherwise, the other products can end up becoming meaningless. One way to avoid this issue is by designing products that vary inversely on two axes. For example, a sword that does more damage can have a short expiration date or other form of upkeep cost that requires it to cost more over time to own, while a sword that does less damage lasts for a long time with minimal upkeep. This process creates an interesting trade off in traits and make different choices optimal for different characters.

- **Returns to scale:** Factors of real economies that are often not present in game economies are returns to scale, meaning that if larger amounts are produced, they can be produced with less cost. This process generally involves an initial investment that doesn't improve the efficiency until a certain volume of production is reached. Returns to scale can be done in games as well. For example, an expensive piece of gear can be crafted to make a production skill more efficient. If the production skill is not used often, then crafting the piece of gear is not worth it, but if the skill is used a lot, then the gear pays off. Also, by embedding the efficiency in a piece of gear, it becomes transferable and, therefore, can be stolen or borrowed by another character, which allows for additional interesting interactions.

4. Wikipedia. "Perfect Competition." *Wikipedia*. Last accessed November 10, 2015. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfect_competition.

5. Simon Ludgate, "Virtual Economic Theory: How MMOs Really Work," *Gamasutra*, last accessed November 10, 2015. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134576/virtual_economic_theory_how_mmos_.php?print=1.

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Cultivating Responsible Masculinity in Gaming Communities

Tayler Stokes

Introduction

Contemporary social activists insist that gaming culture—both analog and digital—has misogynistic elements, claiming that the needs of women and other marginalized groups are not often met to the same degree as those of men and other privileged groups. Incidents of harmful actions including violence and other sexist attitudes or behaviors remain widely prevalent in gaming communities.[1] Similar complaints extend to the culture of the gaming industry as well, which has been characterized as "flirting with overt misogyny."[2]

Thankfully, discussion about equality and inclusivity in our play spaces has made significant progress in recent years, as has our understanding of consent and awareness of sexual assault and marginalization. Practices such as safe words have emerged in various gaming communities that allow for players to address personal needs or moderate game content in play.[3]

Despite this growing consciousness, new incidents of sexual assault are reported every year. Studies repeatedly show that men are committing more than 95% of all acts of domestic violence.[4] Jessie Kreinert of Illinois State University notes that "socialization, peer pressure, media, and military influences [] lead to violence being an acceptable behavior in men."[5] Other sexist attitudes and behaviors are also distressingly common in gaming communities and have been for a long time, including sexual comments; unwanted looks; biased or preferential treatment; and unequal opportunities to participate in conversations and leadership. Gaming has largely been a "boy's club" over the last several decades, but now there are "enough women who are tired of being told to put up with the same sexist nonsense and are speaking up that they're finally being noticed."[6]

In order to have an inclusive and vibrant community, it is imperative that leaders and community members alike acknowledge that community spaces are negatively influenced by pervasive social structures regarding gender, which can only be overcome by addressing the structures through discussion and action. This article aims to offer some suggestions for improvement in gaming communities by cultivating responsible masculinity. Trends of violence and sexism will not change unless we address the deeply ingrained and practiced beliefs about masculinity that men use to justify violence, sexualizing remarks, aggressive behaviors, and seizure of dominance.

In this article, I will offer some practical advice on how to encourage responsible masculine behavior in gaming spaces so that men can use their masculinity to support the people of their communities rather than dominate them. I am approaching this issue from my experience participating in roleplaying-games that are predominantly grounded in interpersonal conversation that establishes a narrative composed of player-created content, such as tabletop and larp. I have also seen the effectiveness of these strategies in similar activities, such as group video gameplay and discussions.

Though the responsibility for establishing safer and more inclusive spaces falls upon everyone, this call to action is first and foremost for the men and the organizers of our gaming communities. Despite the fact that I have framed this article in terms of the behavior of men, please note that gender is fluid and people of any gender may act and identify as masculine. The advice presented here applies to any masculine behavior regardless of the gender of the people in question.

About Me

I am writing this article from a variety of perspectives. First of all, I have been organizing events large and small for my local gaming community, Games to Gather, since 2011. I have seen the comfort and safety of our community compromised by masculine behavior and I have set about creating systems and standards for maintaining inclusivity within our spaces while discouraging problematic behavior. Second, I have previously worked as a social worker in domestic violence intervention, where I worked with abusive men to correct their beliefs about gender and personhood, which they used to justified their abuse. Finally, I am a straight white cismale[7] and I consider it my responsibility to do what I can to account for how my behavior affects others. I think it is important for me to be honest, yet critical about the social constructs that have shaped my life and identity.

Let me be the first to admit that I am still rewiring old habits. Changing your behavior takes a sustained effort, dedicated reflection, and an accountable response to missteps made along the way.

About You

As you read through this article, please understand that my goal is not to label anyone who has ever behaved poorly as an abuser, misogynist, bully, or anything else. People who are otherwise well-intentioned can do or say unexamined things and otherwise make mistakes. I prefer to discuss the behaviors themselves instead of equating one's actions to the sum of their personal value. Dismissing a person as "just a bully" is ineffective at addressing any of the surrounding issues and also reduces one's need to respond constructively. The real problem lies more with the social structures that perpetuate discrimination than it does with any given individual or any isolated action,[8] though it is critically important that one consider how they interact with those social structures.

You may find yourself considering your own behavior as you read. Please accept your own shortcomings as they are, address them honestly, and know that they are not the final word on your value as a person. Nobody is without personal failings. Your willingness to challenge your shortcomings demonstrates great strength of character.

This article primarily discusses gender-based marginalization and oppression, but that doesn't mean that other forms or marginalization are not worth acknowledging as well. If you are reading this article, you probably identify to some extent as a geek and have also experienced marginalization in one form or another; the experience is so commonplace that it regularly appears as a trope in film, television, and other media. Acknowledge that these different kinds marginalization overlap in some ways, even though one is wider and more severe than another. One does not need to have suffered the most for their suffering to be valid and real. Approach issues of marginalization with the willingness to accept the lived experiences of others.

What is Responsible Masculinity?

Before we can discuss the concept of responsible masculinity, we need to discuss notions of traditional masculinity. "As socially constructed identities, boys and men learn 'appropriate' gender roles in accordance [with] the masculine expectations of their given society."[9] Examples of the many things I heard both growing up and as an adult include phrases like "be a man," "grow a pair," "bros before hoes," "don't cry," "stand up for yourself," and criticism for doing anything "like a girl," among others. I know that I am not alone in this; these phrases are so common that the pervasiveness of this attitude is undeniable. When a man is loud, aggressive, or promiscuous, by and large, it is not considered problematic or even unusual. Women who behave in these ways are derided as "crazy," "emotional," "hysterical," "bossy," or "sluts." Male entitlement—and male privilege—regarding respect, sex, attention, or whatever else describes a similar double standard.

Many of the statements mentioned above—and their variations—are challenges to behave in a certain way. Boys and men are shamed when they fail to perform accordingly and are rewarded with attention and status among other boys or men when they do. This highly constrained identity is unhealthy for men and harmful to everybody else. Considering the pressures to wield dominance over others in various social arenas and to conceal emotional responses at all times, it is not much of a surprise that the result is destructive behavior from the man in question toward other people in his life.

Hegemonic masculinity, as popularized by R. W. Con-

1. "Timeline of Incidents," *Geek Feminism Wiki*, last accessed August 25, 2015, http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline_of_incidents.

2. Ian Williams, "Death of the Gamer," *Jacobin Magazine*, September 2014, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/death-to-the-gamer/.

3. "Safewords," *Nordic Larp Wiki*, last modified November 2013, http://nordiclarp.org/w/index.php?title=Safewords.

4. "About Domestic Violence," *Center Against Rape & Domestic Violence*, accessed August 25, 2015, http://cardv.org/aboutdv.php.

5. Jessie L. Kreinert, "Masculinity and Crime: A Quantitate Exploration of Messerschmidt's Hypothesis," *The Electronic Journal of Sociology* (2003), http://www.sociology.org/content/vol7.2/01_krienert.html.

6. Peter Woodworth, "Level Up: Guys, We Need to Talk," in *The Wyrd Con Companion 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles: Wyrd Con, 2014), 88, http://www.wyrdcon.com/2014/05/the-wyrd-con-companion-book/.

7. "Cisgender," *Gender Wiki*, last accessed August 25, 2015, http://gender.wikia.com/wiki/Cisgender.

8. Sandra Kim, "Feminism is for Everyone," *Everyday Feminism*, July 2012, http://everydayfeminism.com/2012/07/feminism-is-for-everyone/.

9. "Man and Masculinities," *Women and Gender Advocacy Center*, last accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.wgac.colostate.edu/men-and-masculinities.

nell, is "the most dominant form of manhood" and is "characterized by several key tenants: 1) distance oneself from femininity; 2) restrict emotions; 3) be tough and aggressive (avoid vulnerability); 4) be seen as highly sexual with women; and 5) prove one's heterosexuality via homophobia."[10] The byproduct is a series of dominance establishing behaviors that go largely unquestioned, even though they have a large impact on social spaces. Similarly, traditional notions of masculinity characterize men as providers. When men fail to be good providers, it reflects poorly on them, thereby creating a pressure for men to take firm control of their social environments.

Responsible masculinity asks men to think differently about those pressures; to be conscious of the systems and social dynamics in which they willingly or unknowingly participate; to be aware of the privilege from which they benefit; and to use that privilege to stand against confining social norms and gender-based oppression. Instead of competing with and controlling others, responsible masculinity asks men to reframe those drives to support and empower them, to celebrate their efforts and have compassion for their struggles. Responsible masculinity finds value in sharing resources and influence, supporting people in collaborative efforts, standing alongside others as they face challenges, and addressing insecurities courageously. Strength of presence can be a powerful asset when used with compassion and care. To achieve this goal, one must develop and act upon a sense of empathy for the lived experiences of others.

Why It's Important

The intended goals of cultivating responsible masculinity in a gaming community are to create safer and more inclusive spaces; lower the barrier to participation for people belonging to marginalized groups; establish an equal medium of participation for all community members; diversify the discourse of the community; and stand against gender-based oppression. All of these goals help participants have more enriching play experiences and relationships. Expanded concepts of masculinity would be healthier for the men of the community, but it would likely be a greater benefit for everybody else.

A gaming community is not fundamentally different from any other community in terms of to how people treat each other and how the community members wield their privilege. A gaming community revolves around community members being creatively, if not personally, vulnerable together, in addition to whatever social vulnerability a person might be feeling on account of enjoying games in the first place. Beneficial effects on interpersonal relationships are perhaps the most widely reported positive effects of gaming.[11] Though this heightened vulnerability leaves the door open for deeper and more intimate relationships, it also constitutes an additional risk of abuse or mistreatment for each participant. Therefore, in a gaming community, organizers must go to greater lengths in order to create a space that is equally, or at least optimally, accommodating to the experiences of all participants.

The very presence of a community that embraces responsible masculinity serves as an inspirational statement to other communities: gaming, geek, or otherwise. Aside from local accomplishments, a socially conscious community has the potential for large-scale positive action through example alone. The opportunity to influence other local communities and similar communities in other areas is an important effect of the work done in your own home community.

Some people will not see the behaviors against which I am recommending as objectionable, problematic, or inherently misogynistic. While these views are valid, they do not represent the perspectives of all people. Even though some people may not have an issue with certain behaviors, it is unjustified to dismiss the feelings of those that do. The driving motivations behind this conversation are very simple: no person or group of people is better or more important than any other and everybody deserves to be treated respectfully, to enjoy the same level of comfort, to be served equally, and to be given the same opportunities.

What You Can Do

It may seem like a daunting task to affect the kinds of change discussed in this article. Addressing your own personal behaviors is one thing, but encouraging behaviors on a community-wide level requires more subtle strategies. Remember that an individual only has to be inspired to make those personal changes once, and that with each small adjustment to community practices and culture, the message gets a little clearer. You may not reach everybody, but reaching enough people to make a difference is certainly possible.

I divide the strategies for change into three general kinds. When *modeling positive behavior*, one makes it easier for others to act in kind and identifies oneself as a support person within the community. *Challenging prevalent conceptions of masculinity* helps to gradually dismantle confining masculine narratives and replace them with newer, healthier, and safer narratives. Finally, *establishing community practices* creates an accountable environment capable of fostering long-term growth within the community.[12] Your particular role also determines your scope of responsibility to affect positive change in your gaming community.

Remember that an individual only has to be inspired to make those personal changes once, and that with each small adjustment to community practices and culture, the message gets a little clearer. You may not reach everybody, but reaching enough people to make a difference is certainly possible.

Since most of my perspective comes from conversation-based in-person games with player-created content, I focus on how the use of voice and community status might affect the other participants. A dominant voice or personality has the potential to prevent the other players from contributing to the game in equal measure, as game systems often provide moderation of creative contributions through play procedures or require the players to moderate themselves.[13] Any misuse of one's voice or status is tantamount to censorship because it negatively impacts the ability of other players to contribute equally. Alternately, using a dominant voice or presence to intervene or censor harmful statements is entirely justified.

However, none of the strategies described here will suffice when it comes to physical, emotional, psychological, sexual abuse, or any other deliberate effort to control another person. A much greater level of intervention is required in abuse situations. I would advise reaching out to a local domestic violence shelter for consultation on the issue as a safer option until the appropriate legal measures can be taken.

Pursuing any action at all requires caution since the victim may be faced with retaliation before effective legal action can take place. Until official channels can respond, it would be wise to take note of exactly what the perpetrator says and does so that there is a standing record of events that includes witness reports and saved electronic communication. People who are unaccountable or emotionally manipulative are likely to twist words, play on doubts, present themselves as a victim, and otherwise create confusing drama that will be difficult for anybody to decipher. Catching a manipulator in their lies is often the only effective way of resolving the resulting confusion and may be of critical importance if and when authorities do get involved.

Some Basics

No matter who you are or what your role may be, two skills are necessary before you can understand how you affect others in shared social spaces: self-examination and empathy. Everybody is responsible for the harm they cause, even if the intentions were not malicious.

Self-examination is a process of introspection in which you view your motives and behaviors from an outside perspective in order to make an assessment about the nature of them. Careful self-examination is essential, and while self-doubt or self-deprecation is not the point, the truth can be uncomfortable.

Empathy is the ability to understand how others feel.[14] Because casual usage is imprecise, many people confuse empathy with sympathy, which is imagining how *you* would feel in someone else's situation. Empathy is fundamentally an act of imagination. Exercising empathy often covers a range of possibilities of how *the other*

10. "Man and Masculinities," *Women and Gender Advocacy Center*, last accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.wgac.colostate.edu/men-and-masculinities.

11. Mikko Meriläinen, "The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing Hobby on Personal Development—A Survey Report," *The International Journal of Role-Playing* 3 (2012): 60-61, http://ijrp.subcultures.nl/.

12. "Theories that Shape Our Work," *Men Can Stop Rape*, last accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.mencanstoprape.org/Theories-that-Shape-Our-Work/.

13. Karl Bergström, "Creativity Rules: How Rules Impact Player Creativity in Three Tabletop Roleplaying Games," *The International Journal of Role-Playing* 3 (2012): 15, http://ijrp.subcultures.nl/.

14. *Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary*, "empathy," last accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.merriam-webster.com/medical/empathy.

person might feel under the given circumstances and listening to what they are saying about their feelings. Fortunately, role-playing games and other narrative-based activities "provide tools and a suitable environment for developing positive interaction and group skills – both important elements to empathic intelligence."[15]

Apply both empathy and self-examination to your own behavior by listening to your own voice as an observer. For example: How much are you speaking compared to everybody else? Are you raising your voice over others in order to get your comment in? Have you been cutting people off? How have others been responding to you? Who is competing with you for air space and who is just letting you talk? This process is essentially empathetic because you are considering how others are responding to your behavior.

Though the following could apply to any community member, these strategies target masculine behaviors. Instead of trying to overhaul your personal behavior or community's culture all at once, take just a few items at a time; apply your empathy and self-examination; and commit to gradual, but deliberate progress.

As an Individual

Since men are more likely to listen to other men, male community members have a particularly important role in this cause and have a unique opportunity to act as feminist allies. The conscious behavior of men is an extremely important measure in cultivating responsible masculinity in any community. Since many of the related issues are exacerbated in gaming communities, the impact of men's behavior is even more pronounced—for better and worse. Questioning and scrutinizing pervasive behaviors in a non-confrontational manner is a more direct way of bringing these issues to the community's attention.

Those who are in positions of leadership or authority can assist with these processes in various ways. As a leader, your investment in the health of your community includes some responsibility for what takes place within the community. Others expect those with authority to advocate for the well-being of the entire community. If somebody needs to step in and take direct action, or deal with awkward and sticky human situations, it will probably fall to a person in a position of leadership.

In Any Participating Role

Listen and keep on listening: When others speak, give them your undivided attention. Make eye contact while listening and speaking. Learn to notice small temperature changes in the conversation and consciously refuse to escalate into more heated conversations. Apologize for interruptions and cut-offs, and correct those habits. Instead invite others to speak, look for people trying to get a word in, and generally share the air space. Hedge your opinions to allow for other perspectives to be valid as well. When you are wrong, admit it, even if it's a small thing. When people have good points or insights, acknowledge them instead of remaining quiet.

One of the most widespread behaviors men exhibit is the need to explain to others, to demonstrate expertise and knowledge, and to be correct. The result is that men often crowd out the voices of women, who face social pressures to be polite and not interrupt. Not only is that frustrating to those being interrupted, but it skews the conversation and prevents women from voicing an opinion in conversations. Recognize these for the dominance establishing habits they are and dispense with them. This certainly includes obsessing over historical or factual details when playing a game, which is also disrespectful to the creativity of the other players at the table.

Ditch defensiveness: Though a defensive reaction is understandable when one is met with criticism, it usually isn't helpful. When you respond with defensiveness, you participate in a kind of social jockeying for status that makes the social space about competition and emphasizes dominance, neither of which are conducive toward creating and maintaining an inclusive space. Instead, respond with curiosity and compassion. Ask questions and take the answers seriously. Disagreements are understandable, but do not neglect discourse and investigation.

Occasionally, a player will express distaste for the content added to by another player. When another player is uncomfortable with one of your contributions, respond with care. Understand that they are establishing their boundaries and that it probably is not a personal judgment or attack. Writing the event off as a joke is unhelpful and leaves the other person unsure if you even care about their boundaries.

Defensiveness is often followed by escalation in the conversation. By staying curious instead of defensive, you are taking preventative measures to make sure that a conversation never gets heated in the first place.

Accept that you might be wrong about something: The urge to be right about something is often motivated by the desire to avoid embarrassment. Similarly, hiding behind a "wall of facts" instead of accepting the details of a person's lived experience avoids having empathy for those experiences. This behavior is extremely invalidating and treats the other person as though they are an unreliable witness to the events of their own lives.

Educate yourself: Do not expect or demand others to educate you on a given topic. While it's fine to inquire about a subject with someone, the burden to stay informed falls upon you. Asking a third party for recommendations for educational resources is a reasonable starting point.

Resources are readily available online. *Finally, A Feminism Blog*[16] has lots of useful starting points. *Everyday Feminism*[17] has a wealth of practical articles about intersectional feminism. *xoJane* published a practical article about what men can do to be feminist allies, which strongly influenced this article.[18] There are also specifically gaming-related recourses such as *Gaming as Women*[19] and *Gaming as Other*[20] that regularly discuss inclusivity and social change within gaming communities.

As you read, remember that articles addressing problematic behaviors are not typically intended to be personal attacks on the reader, even if the reader belongs to a group the article may be examining. Please take the suggestions found in articles as opportunities for practicing empathy and developing healthier communication.

Sometimes just stay out of it: Acknowledge that sometimes, it is not your place to say anything at all, especially if your personal experiences are not relevant to the conversation. Even when you feel like you have something to say, consider for a moment that maybe you ought to just listen and observe instead. Men are often socially rewarded to speak their mind and so they often do whether they can effectively contribute to the discussion or not. If somebody is recounting their personal experiences, then you should be listening and supporting them.

Relinquish control: Resist the urge to do everything yourself or to step in and see that things get "done right." Instead, wait until you are asked for help or input before jumping in or, at the very least, ask if your assistance is wanted before assuming that it is. Acting as though your methods are the only correct methods is belittling to others.

Mistakes also have their place. If a plan does not succeed, then embrace the incident as an educational experience from which everybody can grow and eventually function as a team of equals. Furthermore, when you share responsibilities, others have the opportunity to see the value of their own efforts.

Check in with others: If something seems off, if somebody seems like they are upset, or if a conversation is escalating, stop and ask the person in question if they are okay. Follow up with an observation, such as, "Is everything alright? I noticed that we are both getting more animated here." Note that this statement also takes accountability for your own participation in the situation. Check in with yourself when you find that you are activating beyond the casual sphere of conversation. Confirm that your anger, hurt, etc. are not misplaced before you act on those feelings.

It is perfectly acceptable to ask to take a break from game play in order to check in on someone's emotional well-being or to step away to get some space yourself. Many modern games have a feature like this built in to their structure. Some people may feel reluctant to ask for a break because they feel pressured not to interrupt play. It's better to be safe than sorry and check in with them anyway if you think this issue might be the case. If they say they are okay, then take them at their word.

Apologize and make amends like a pro: Many people uncomfortable when facing the harm that they may have caused and will apologize quickly or insincerely. A more accountable apology goes well beyond simply acknowledging your actions by considering how the injured party was affected and by stating what you will do in the future to avoid making the same mistake again. Making amends takes an apology a step farther by restoring justice, as much as is possible.[21] If this is not possible, then you can move forward by modifying your behavior so that past mistakes will not be repeated in the future.

For example, you might say, "When I made that joke, I didn't stop to think about how you or others might feel about it, or about how about saying and laughing at that stuff makes it socially acceptable for others to also make jokes like that. You probably feel like this all the time and I made it worse. I do care about you and your feelings and I'm sorry that I disrespected and hurt you. I'm not going to joke about that anymore and I'll speak up when I hear demeaning jokes like that. I'm also going to stop and consider what I say before I just say it for a quick laugh. I understand that you might need some distance from me, but if there is anything I can do to make up for it I would like to do it. I hope that our friendship can recover from this."

When you make promises, do all the things you said you would, always. Consider apologizing publicly if it is warranted. Do not shy away from apologizing during awkward circumstances; the injured party's need for an apology far outweighs your need to save face.

15. Meriläinen.

16. See http://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com/.

17. See http://everydayfeminism.com/.

18. Pamela Clark, "35 Steps Men Can Take to Support Feminism," *xoJane,* June 13, 2014, http://www.xojane.com/issues/feminism-men-practical-steps.

19. See http://www.gamingaswomen.com/.

20. See http://www.strixwerks.com/gaming.

21. "Making Amends is More than an Apology," *Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation,* last accessed August, 25 2015, http://www.hazelden.org/web/public/has70305.page.

Forgive social faux pas, mistakes, and shortcomings: Nobody is above making mistakes now and then. Accept others as they are by letting the little things go. Everybody is fallible.

Spaces that are not accepting of mistakes create a pressure to perform and an expectation of expertise that not only creates huge barriers of participation for newer and less dominant community members, but also is inappropriate for recreational activities like gaming.

Clean up your vocabulary: The use of language constructs and rehearses normative cultural values even if it seems innocuous to you. Groups of mixed gender should not be referred to as "guys"; find a more inclusive word, such as "folks," "friends," "everybody," or even just "people." Referring to women as "ladies," "girls," or "chicks" is demeaning at best and objectifying at worst. Show your respect for them by using words that address them as adult individuals instead of as children or conquests.

Before introducing a game element that makes use of foul, hurtful, or objectifying language ask the players if they are comfortable with including it in their game. By asking first you are letting everybody know that you understand that this language can be harmful and that making use of it could negatively impact their play experience.

Always respect pronouns and chosen names of other players. Ask if you do not know. Make a serious effort to remember. If you are using nametags, include your desired pronouns on your nametag.

Keep sexual comments to yourself: In community spaces, it usually is not appropriate to comment on the attractiveness of others, regardless of your opinions or who may be listening to you. This also applies to any other unwanted and unrequested sexual attention as well, including whistling, looks, glances, and preferential treatment.

The only time it is acceptable to make remarks on a person's appearance or attractiveness is when you are certain that your remarks are wanted. It is often difficult to separate a man's comments on a woman's appearance from a sexual context even when that is not the motivation, so consider carefully before commenting.

However, some women are receptive to attention and comments on their appearance since, in many cases, this is one of few ways that women can achieve status within gaming communities. Experiences and feelings along these lines are real and valid, but it still important to be careful when commenting on a person's appearance.

This discretion also applies to in-games comments. Unless it has been made clear to everybody that a game may include sexual content, leave it out.

A woman of my community recently voiced to me that "any time [she] looks around [while at a game store], [she] is basically guaranteed to make eye contact with a man at another table." This means that a woman in that space is probably being examined by a man nearly most of the time. Your comments about her attractiveness are inseparable from other pervasive forms of unwanted attention. Avoid exacerbating the issue by withholding your comments.

Let others make their own decisions: While there is no problem in asking things of others, motivating people by tapping into their sense of guilt, shame, or pride is manipulative. Unfortunately, this behavior often goes unchallenged and has become fairly common; the difference between genuine and manipulative expressions can be subtle. If you have something you need to express to somebody, do it with an honest and vulnerable approach instead of just trying to "get" them to do something. Emphasizing the penalty of refusal or failure is generally manipulative, as is using that refusal or failure against them later. Just be straightforward with your request so they can make a decision without being influenced or pressured into a particular outcome.

Playing off of fear or hurt is indicative of a much more aggressive level of manipulation and warrants a higher level of intervention. These incidents should be brought to the attention of an authority figure.

Talk about cultural issues and feminism: Take social issues seriously and show that you do through action and discussion. Care about things that do not directly impact you. Stand against a culture of silence that prefers not to discuss complicated or ugly issues by speaking openly about them.

Some people have misconceptions about what feminism is and what it means for men. Feminism is the advocacy of equal civil and cultural rights for people of all genders. Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American scholar on critical race theory, coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how race, gender, class, and other issues are interrelated and cannot be properly examined in isolation.[22] Contrary to a commonly held belief, feminism does not identify men as the problem, but rather "strives to end the discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of people due to their gender, sexual orientation, race, class, and other differences and supports people in being free to determine their own lives for themselves."[23]

22. "Intersectionality," *Geek Feminism Wiki*, last accessed August 26, 2015, http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Intersectionality.

23. Kim, Sandra. "Feminism is for Everyone," *Everyday Feminism*, July 2012, http://everydayfeminism.com/2012/07/feminism-is-for-everyone/.

You do not owe anyone an education on the basics of feminism, but keeping these topics a part of the community discourse builds awareness not only about how our own actions affect others, but how people are impacted by current events and issues.

Show vulnerability and value emotional expression: Cultural narratives regarding masculinity dictate that men should be tough and should not express their emotions or insecurities.[24] Stand against this isolating dialog by being open about how you feel. Chose to play games that you find personally affecting. By doing these things, you show that being open is not a weakness and it will be easier for others to do the same. If you are having difficulty expressing yourself, try beginning with, "I feel/felt… when… because..." and elaborating from there.

Listen and respect the emotional expressions of others. Do not dismiss somebody as overreacting or being irrational. Being emotionally expressive can feel like risky business to the person emoting, and shutting them down or even acting indifferently can be a very bad experience for them. By handling these moments with care, you help foster a safer space for people to say how they really feel.

Many games with affecting subject matter conclude with *debriefings* at the end, which allow players to discuss how they were impacted by the play experience. If you have feelings to share, the debriefing is the opportunity to speak about them and allow your perceived experience to be changed by listening to the words of others.

Fortunately, games can offer many low risk opportunities for emotional investment. Many games that revolve around creating stories together allow you share in the triumphs and tragedies of the story you just created at minimum, and some games explore sensitive issues more directly.[25]

Communicate boundaries: Vocalize what you are comfortable with both in- and out-of-game. In most situations, a few comments will suffice. Before play, discuss what kind of content you want to explore in the game. If there is something that might come up that you do not want to include in play, discuss that as well. Many communities make use of procedures that allow players to adjust game content as they play. Some examples include "Cut and Brake,"[26] "Lines and Veils,"[27] and the "X-card."[28]

For games that potentially involve physical contact, nametags can also be used to note what contact you are comfortable with. The Games to Gather community implements a four-letter code to generally describe what kind of contact we are comfortable with; *N* for "none: give me space and let me make contact first so you can follow suit," *F* for "friendly: casual touches, hugs, handshakes, and high-fives are okay," *A* for "aggressive: getting in my space, grabbing an arm or wrist, and light pushes are okay as long as it doesn't put me of balance or leave a mark," and *I* for "intimate: snuggling, hand holding, and closeness are okay as long as it isn't sexual." Participants can always get an idea of another participant's boundaries with a quick glance at the letters on their nametags.

Get permission: Do not assume that another person's boundaries are the same as yours. Before you touch somebody or broach a sensitive topic in-game or out-of-game, ask for their permission to do so. The only boundaries you have any right to push are your own. Your request does not have to be complicated: "I think things are about to heat up. Would it be alright if my character seduced yours?"

Generally, introducing any content that borders on the lived experience of others requires permission from some or all of the other players unless it is explicitly included in the core content of the game. This is true of content that references any kind of oppression, marginalization, or trauma. If those topics are not a part of your lived experience, than you are doubly responsible for checking in with the group before introducing them.

Sexual content also requires up-front permission from the playgroup. Some players are very interested in exploring sexual themes in play and there are many games that centralize sexual content. However, many people are not as comfortable discussing sexual themes in play contexts, so establishing boundaries is essential.

Intervene as a bystander: When you notice something that might be harmful, *immediately* speak up, even if it interrupts a game you are playing. Speaking up does not necessarily mean calling somebody out in a harsh way—though for malicious behavior, this may be justified—but it does mean voicing a firm opinion on how something is inappropriate or harmful. A compassionate approach can be helpful for making a productive con-

24. "Man and Masculinities," *Women and Gender Advocacy Center*, last accessed 25 August 2015, http://www.wgac.colostate.edu/men-and-masculinities.

25. Meriläinen, 62-65.

26. "Safewords," *Nordic Larp Wiki*, last modified November 2013, http://nordiclarp.org/w/index.php?title=Safewords.

27. Ron Edwards, *Sorcerer: Sword, Soul, and Sex*, Chicago: Adept Press, 2003, 11-16.

28. John Stavropoulos, "Safety Tools for Simulations, Role-Playing, and Games…," last accessed August 26, 2015, http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg.

versation out of the incident instead of a confrontation. A compassionate approach is especially required if you are commenting on another player's in-game creativity. Think about the way you speak; your tone of voice will convey compassion more clearly than the content of what you say much of the time.

A firm yet compassionate approach can be a difficult balance to strike. Examples include: "Hey, I know you just meant that to be funny, but I think it was pretty disrespectful"; "Could you not make those kinds of remarks? I have to remind myself sometimes too"; "I think so-and-so was bothered by that thing you did. I think they would appreciate it if you talked to them and apologized"; "Hey, I'd appreciate it if things like that didn't happen here, okay?"

Intervening as a bystander is one of the most impactful ways a man can use their social affordances to create change in their community. As Peter Woodworth explains, "In the end, in order to facilitate change, we can't just avoid sexism ourselves. We also have to call other men on it when they behave badly toward women."[29] Wielding masculinity can be both effective and appropriate when disrupting hurtful or unwelcome comments and behavior.

This does not mean making every little thing your business—acting like you're some kind of moral arbiter is also domineering—but checking in with the people about whom you are concerned is a reasonable course of action. Showing courage by standing up to problematic behaviors can be affirming to those who withstand such behaviors. It also guides the community through action by modeling interventional behavior for those who are uncomfortable acting themselves.

In Leadership and Authority Positions

Welcome criticism: Social awareness is changing rapidly in recent years. Practices and policies that were once effective will need to be updated to reflect the changing needs of your community. In order to adapt, your organization will need the benefit of many perspectives. Those involved with the organization must be open to feedback and criticism or this is not possible. Developing a procedure for accepting criticism is important or else some people may feel intimidated by speaking to a person directly. Establishing multiple conduits with some measure of anonymity is an effective way of keeping communication channels open.

29. Peter Woodworth, "Level Up: Guys, We Need to Talk," in *Wyrd Con Companion 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con), 93, http://www.wyrdcon.com/2014/05/the-wyrd-con-companion-book/.

If you aren't sure, ask: Your community and colleagues are among your greatest assets. If you are faced with a problem that is too big for just one person, ask for help. Do not wait for things to become so difficult that you absolutely need help before you seek assistance.

Be available: Arrive early to events and games and linger after, be present on social media to some degree, and respond promptly to emails. Thank others for reaching out to you. Validate other's play experiences, especially if they are different from yours. Greet everyone, get to know the new folks and avoid the temptation to socialize only with your personal friends. Check in with people to see how things are going. Odds are strong that people will feel more like sharing their experiences if you are actively encouraging them to do so.

Move on when it's time: A person who is well suited to their position now may not remain best suited for their position indefinitely. A change in the needs of the community or personal lives may result in somebody else being better qualified for your position; careful community mentoring should result in enabling new leaders by following these guidelines. When this need is brought to your attention for your position, be open to the possibility of change. Transition to other roles within the community gracefully, even if they are of lesser scope.

Accepting a change in position also makes room for other people to act and grow as community leaders and allows them to bring their vision to the organization. Personnel changes can become especially important as the community grows more diverse.

As a Group

Community practices create opportunities to rehearse cultural behaviors. The design of community practices will favor certain behaviors over others. Consider which behaviors you are inviting and make adjustments accordingly; a person that sees others practicing awareness, empathy, and personal change has a subtle incentive to participate in kind.

It would likely be practically and culturally ineffective for a community leader who has not undergone self-examination and empathy building to develop or implement community practices centered on social consciousness. Efforts made by community leaders must be sincere; anything less will not be taken seriously and may do more harm that good since similar efforts would be easier to disregard. Community leaders should start with themselves and listen carefully while implementing changes.

Play games of many different interests: Program events that feature activities that go beyond passing off violence and conquest as entertainment. Playing more sensitive games in addition to light-hearted games will validate a wider range of interests and also may expose players to new and constructive experiences. There are many games that have "touchy-feely" content or offer social criticism; explore them as a community.

Games with socially relevant content, which are sometimes referred to as *engagist* because they "engage with" rather than "escape from" existing social issues, have other pro-social values as well. As John Scott Tynes explains:

> *When works of interactive storytelling can teach us how to solve those problems and discover those joys, while entertaining us just as novels, movies, and music do, these works become worthy of real cultural critique and join the great conversation of human thought. Such engagist works can utilize and expand our knowledge, immerse us in real ideas and cultures, and provide tools to explore behaviors and interpret events. Art, knowledge, performance, and imagination intersect therein and bestow profound gifts.*[30]

Establish a policy and enforce it equally: Everybody must understand what is expected of them, what they can expect from others, and what kinds of conduct are and are not allowed in community spaces. There are many resources available for developing a policy along these lines, such as the Geek Feminism Wiki.[31] Look to other similar communities and organizations and see how they have approached their policy. Games to Gather developed a policy by adapting—with permission— the policies of several other feminist spaces and gaming organizations.[32]

Once you have a policy in place, it is of utmost importance that it is enforced appropriately. Individuals who are well-established should not be "above the law" or receive any special treatment on account of their social stature. People in leadership positions should be held to a higher standard of conduct as well. It should be noted that people who benefit from status privilege, such as community leaders, have the greatest opportunities to cause harm.[33] Making excuses and looking the other way when established individuals violate conduct agreements shows that all of the promises you made in your policy are meaningless, raising questions about who your policy actually serves.

Unequal enforcement of policy also contributes to widely practiced narratives concerning victim censorship in which victim's accounts are not believed, often in preference for the accused's reputation, plausibly deniable misunderstandings, or commonplace doubts. These are the very attitudes that allow for violent assaults—sexual violence, in particular—to occur in the first place and it treats victims as less reliable witnesses to the events of their own lives than literally anybody else, regardless of their presence for those events.

Coming out as a victim or making an allegation often comes with great social cost, which means that false allegations are far less likely to be made than true ones. A policy will need to detail how these situations are to be handled, and will need to be executed without bias or preference.

Employ equalizing procedures: Equalizing procedures are those that account for an unequal ability to participate due to factors beyond a participant's control by implementing community practices that consider the social environment. Without equalizing procedures in place, the inclusivity of a community can be greatly diminished, as some members of the community are likely to be served to a greater degree than other community members.

Since much of the Games to Gather community revolves around activities where people speak to each other, *Hand Queues*[34] were developed for mediating group conversations. When using *Hand Queues*, participants "queue-up" by holding up a number of fingers, which shows the order in which voices will be heard. This is supplemented by other gestures that allow for non-verbal affirmation, clarifying questions, or stopping and refocusing the conversation if needed. *Hand Queues* insures that everybody is heard in turn, and it has been effective in bringing the supporting voices of women and others when there is competition for air space. *Hand Queues* may not be the tool for your community, but a technique that allows players to participate on equal footing is a statement of your community's cultural values, and helps everybody have rewarding play experiences.

Games to Gather also uses another equalizing tech-

30. John Scott Tynes, "Prismatic Play: Games as Windows on the Real World," in *Wyrd Con Companion 2012*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012), 25, http://www.wyrdcon.com/2014/05/the-wyrd-con-companion-book/.

31. "Conference Anti-harassment/Policy," *Geek Feminism Wiki*, last accessed August 25, 2015. http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Conference_anti-harassment/Policy.

32. "Conduct Agreement," *Games to Gather*, last accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.gamestogather.org/participation/.

33. Karin Edman, "Safer Larps for Young Larpers – Relationships Between Younger and Older Larpers," *Wonderkarin—Preutopisk Nördfeminist*, 2 January 2015, http://wonderkarin.blogspot.com/2015/01/safer-larps-for-young-larpers.html.

34. "Hand Queues," *Games to Gather,* accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.gamestogather.org/hand-queues/.

nique referred to as *Animal Cards*[35] that serves as a fun way for signing up for games at local events. A staff member hands out cards with colorful images of animals on them to the participants. People who are brand new to the event get a fantastic creature, and the returning participants get a normal animal. The fantastic creatures are called first to sign-up for games so that the newcomers have the most control over their experience. Not only do people sign up for games in a random order without making people feel like they are waiting in a line, but the organizers also have some subtle methods for tending to participants with specific needs or considerations. *Animal Cards* was designed to account for the fact that assertive or comfortable community members were more likely to get into their game of choice than less assertive or less comfortable members. *Animal Cards* intends to address the specific challenges inherent to the Games to Gather community. Just as with *Hand Queues*, these challenges and solutions may not apply to your community; you will have to arrive at your own solutions.

Nametags also have an equalizing effect when you include extra information on them, such as pronouns and personal boundaries. It may seem insignificant, but having a passive way of presenting that information can positively impact the comfort of participants who may not conform to the assumptions other people are likely to make about them.

Practice consent: Fully inform all players about a game's content. Present a clear list of core content for the game in question, especially if the game focuses on sexual subjects, trauma, or the lived experiences of any group of people. Allow player input regarding the game's content and strongly consider applying it if at all possible, even if doing so requires making small changes to the game. Not every game or activity is for everybody and the prospective players need to have enough information to self-select. Insure that all players are aware of any exit or safety procedures that are in use and help them understand that they are encouraged to use them. While playing, ask before you introduce sensitive subject matter outside of the scope of the game's core content.

This process is often referred to as a *briefing* since it prepares players for the game. Some game facilitators neglect the briefing by failing to prepare a briefing at all, instead preferring to improvise. An adequate and responsible briefing requires preparation and rehearsal. Write out a checklist and an outline, or a script if you prefer. Players count on the facilitator to give them the information they need and they cannot truly consent if they are not fully informed.

Many role-playing game communities make use of safe words to maintain consent in play. Some examples include "Cut & Brake,"[36] "Lines & Veils,"[37] and the "X-card."[38] Other techniques go a step farther in directing players to pursue certain content and avoid others instead of adjusting content only once a boundary has been crossed. Danish game designer Troels Ken Pedersen explains that safety tools are only as effective as a community's safety culture, so it is essential that safety be discussed and practiced through different tools as needed. Safety tools are "only any good if we actually care about ourselves and each other as people. It's that simple."[39]

You may wish to develop new tools specific to the interests of your own community if pre-existing tools are not robust enough for your needs. No matter which procedures your community choses to practice, advocate their use so that implementing them in play is socially acceptable.

Talk about the impact of your play experiences: The counterpart to the briefing is the *debriefing*, in which players discuss their personal experience of the game. The most basic debriefing goes over what each participant liked and disliked, what they would like to see again, and what could be done better in the future. Socially inquisitive or intense games require debriefings to invite players to discuss their emotions; relate their play experience to their lived experiences and observations; and start an in-depth conversation about the issues brought up during the game. Formal debriefing, according to Sarah Lynne Bowman, "establishes a play culture in which emotional experiences are considered valid and speaking about these moments is not only acceptable, but normative. The more debriefing is practiced in games, the less strange or undesirable serious sharing will seem to players unfamiliar with the process."[40]

The debriefing is a moment for reflection and introspection. Some players may be very vulnerable during this time. Care for each other and accept the accounts of others, especially if they differ from yours.

Not all games need extensive debriefings. However, establishing a community habit of debriefing after every game, even if it is short and basic, practices empathy and many other forms of community care.

People are more important than games: If a game is going badly or if somebody is uncomfortable, stop the game. No matter how interesting the game is, it is not worth somebody getting hurt. It is unacceptable for a group of players to be having fun at the expense of somebody else.

The value of deep play experience can often be uncovered during a debriefing; ending the game early and proceeding to a group conversation about those experiences is still in the spirit of the game's core experience.

Cast light on people belonging to marginalized groups: Involve women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, people of lesser economic statures, people with disabilities, and people who are new to the community. Play games designed by them. Invite them to host games. Make exclusive spaces for them, if desired. Celebrate their creativity, invite their contributions and opinions, and embrace their ideas and perspectives. If you are a straight white cismale, you probably take up more of the social space than you realize, so it is your responsibility to share.

Emphasize cooperation over competition: Games are fundamentally cooperative, though some are more so than others. Deemphasize activities that are aggressively competitive. A brief examination of a game is often all it takes to determine if the playstyle in question supports one style or another. Cooperation is a different skillset than competition and it often goes underdeveloped. Games that centralize cooperation require players to listen and share, which is often not true of competitive spaces. Games that allow for co-creation by the group instead of by a single player are more cooperative by design.

Be unafraid to ask somebody to leave: You have a policy; follow it through. All of your participants are opening themselves up the basic vulnerabilities and risks mentioned earlier and they are doing so on the premise that you will fulfill the promises you have made.

The Games to Gather community has framed this policy in terms of unwelcome behaviors.[41] Participants unable to separate themselves from the unwelcome behavior, be it in-game or out-of-game, may be asked to leave according to the conduct agreement policy. Placing the emphasis on the behavior rather than the person guides the conversation away from direct personal criticism and towards actionable solutions.

On Intercommunity Intimacy

As a community grows, deeper relationships will undoubtedly develop. This is especially true in gaming communities because the creative and personal vulnerability exercised in play in inherently intimacy forming.[42] While intimacy is often deeply rewarding, extra care must be exercised when relationship status begins to intermingle with status and influence within the community.

Exercise discretion: Tangled relationships between members of the community and leaders within the community can be most unfair for those who do not benefit from high status within the community. This can result in many hurt feelings and wide social schisms, in addition to other effects that "can negatively impact the game as a whole."[43]

Those involved in an intercommunity intimate relationship of mixed status are strongly advised to talk about how they will handle a break-up before hurt or strained feelings are involved. The person who benefits from higher status should be willing—and perhaps required as a matter of community policy—to share community spaces or even relinquish their position in the community in favor of the person with lesser status. Breakups that result in a woman leaving the community while the man remains are far too common in gaming communities.[44]

Don't show off your sexual partners: Avoid showing off your sexual partners or emphasizing the sexual nature of your relationship with another person when in community spaces. Some people may feel that their status within the community is lowered by such displays. Others may find sexually explicit discussion uncomfortable whether or not they are party to the conversation itself. This is very different from displaying affection toward your partner.

Showing off sexual partners is often used as a way of establishing dominance and status in a community. Allow your intimate partners to have their own value without being associated with you. Another commonly masculine behavior is to discuss sexual exploits and to imply the sexual nature of a relationship though comments, gestures, and touches. This kind of "marking territory" treats women—and in particular *partners*—as nothing more than sexual objects.

35. "Animal Cards," *Games to Gather*, last accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.gamestogather.org/animal-cards/.

36. "Safewords," *Nordic Larp Wiki*, last modified November 2013, http://nordiclarp.org/w/index.php?title=Safewords.

37. Edwards, 11-16.

38. John Stavropoulos, "Safety Tools for Simulations, Role-Playing, and Games…," last accessed August 26, 2015, http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg.

39. Troels Ken Pedersen, "Your Larp's Only as Safe as its Safety Culture," *Leaving Mundania*, April 4, 2015, http://leavingmundania.com/2015/08/04/your-larps-only-as-safe-as-its-safety-culture/.

40. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Returning to the Real World," Nordiclarp.org, December 8, 2014, http://nordiclarp.org/2014/12/08/debrief-returning-to-the-real-world/.

41. "Conduct Agreement," *Games to Gather*, accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.gamestogather.org/participation/.

42. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Social Conflict in Roleplaying Communities: an Exploratory Qualitative Study." *The International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013): 12, http://ijrp.subcultures.nl/; Meriläinen, 55-56, 62-65.

43. Bowman, "Social Conflict," 11, 15.

44. Hannah Shaffer, "Breaking-up in Small Communities," *Make Big Things*, February 3, 2014, http://makebigthings.com/2014/02/breaking-up-in-small-communities/.

Accept rejection: If your romantic overtures are rejected, accept this outcome gracefully and move on with your life. Constantly placing yourself in their presence in hopes that their feelings will change is "playing the friend zone" and is inappropriate, disrespectful to their feelings, and possessive. Inserting yourself into their life affects what kinds of bonds they can form with others by changing the social space. Even if they are not bothered by your attention, this display of sexual competition is still objectifying.

Watch yourselves: Another issue is of possible predation; leaders are more likely to meet new people, who are in turn likely to depend upon those leaders for assistance. Dependency can arise in many different forms and is a "common situation that can be an indication of abuse or at least uneven power distribution."[45]

Since even the perception of predatory behavior could be damaging to the community, to say the least, leaders ought to adopt a more strict code of conduct in such situations. It is critical that people in positions of power within the community maintain transparency in their relationships and are accountable to both the people involved and community policy. Intimate relationships are wonderful, but in cases such as these the power differential demands that these be pursued with deliberation rather than impulsiveness.

Conclusion

When I decided to begin organizing public gaming events for strangers in 2011, I had only the vaguest idea of what responsibilities I was signing myself up for. I was a typical straight white cismale in that I assumed that everything was for me and that if I just thought hard enough and put in a solid effort I could do pretty much anything. Initially we were not even a community proper, but as attendance grew, so did the needs and demands of the people who attended. Within six months, it was clear that this event and its people were here to stay.

I was very fortunate that as the community grew into its own, others were willing to step up and share their vision for what we could do. The community we have today would not have been possible without their assistance and insight. Early in 2015, the Games to Gather organization had grown so much that it became beneficial to form a 501(c)3 non-profit organization for the play and development of positive action games. I am very glad that I have been able to be a part of it as long as I have been.

I have stated repeatedly that gaming communities are extra susceptible to the issues and concerns belabored in this article. But the opposite is also true: the vulnerability and intimacy of games and play has especially great potential to inspire personal and collective growth. Creating exclusive spaces for women and LGTBQ did have a positive effect on the culture of the entire Games to Gather organization. Having a private space for more intense and vulnerable games has prompted greater sensitivity and awareness to the lived-experiences of others. People will design games of their own if you give them the tools.

None of these comments are meant to suggest that we are done growing, but it is deeply fulfilling to see our vision come to fruition. I have long believed that gaming of all kinds has the potential for prosocial value and positive impact. It is very exciting to be able to say, conclusively, that it can be done, that we are doing it, and that you can do it too.

It is not my goal to portray men and masculinity as the villain that stands between everyone and a positive, healthy, inclusive community. However, in order to have such a community, it is imperative that we be honest and real about the social dynamics that are shaping our social spaces. Masculine behavior and sexism are not the only issues that inclusive communities must address. However, men do have a large hand in shaping their social environments. It is up to men to account for that influence by being aware of the force of their presence and taking responsibility for how they affect others. It is not easy and it is not quick, but it is worth it and it is on us.

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45. Karin Edman, "Safer Larps for Young Larpers – Relationships Between Younger and Older Larpers," *Wonderkarin—Preutopisk Nördfeminist*, 2 January 2015, http://wonderkarin.blogspot.com/2015/01/safer-larps-for-young-larpers.html.

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Crossgender Role-playing in Russian Larps

Olga Vorobyeva

Without a doubt, secrecy, mystery and even travesty can be transformed into a playing activity.
—Roger Caillois[1]

Larps are supposed to be a space of freedom and creativity. In Russian larps, this creative freedom sometimes includes an option to choose a character whose gender does not coincide with that of the player. This discrepancy is called *crossgender playing*, or *crossplay*, and in most cases, it refers to female larpers portraying male characters.[2] For male players, it is much less common to choose a female character, so this process takes place in rather special contexts.

Taking into account a wider comparative perspective, it is surprising that crossgender playing is mostly a Russian phenomenon; even Nordic larp communities where gender equality is much valued usually do not let their players switch their gender roles for a game. This observation became a starting point for exploring the implicit principles of gender attitudes of local larp cultures.

The methodology of this research includes participant-observation in Russian and non-Russian larp events; interviews with Swedish, Italian, and Russian larpers and larp organizers; and the collection and analysis of data from Internet larp blogs and forums, especially concerning conflicts and discussions regarding the different gender attitudes of participants.

The History of Russian Crossgender Playing

First, I will explain some features of the Russian larp community to make clear the origins and current trends of crossgender playing.

Russian crossplay appeared as soon as larps began in Russia. According to Alexey Semenov,[3] larps in Russia started in the early 1990s with J.R.R. Tolkien. Most of Tolkien's popular characters are male elves, who are much more refined and "feminine" than what is usually associated "traditional" patterns of male socialization. A girl playing a male elf, or even a male elven lord, which meant a key character, was routine in the 1990s. Some girls even preferred to play male characters only; some switched between genders from one larp to another. This situation was often related to off-game life and gender socialization; within the larp community, such a girl could either profess a masculine style of behavior and outer appearance, or act more masculine with girls, while remaining feminine when communicating with men. There is no research on gender issues in the Russian larp community in the 1990s, but from the interviews and some fiction literature created by the community,[4] it is possible to judge how widespread this phenomenon was.

Dina Pisarevskaya interprets the cases of girls following "male" behavioral patterns as a lack of "strict division between male and female behavior … a girl could get the name of a male hero or even the Dark Lord and behave according to this name within the community."[5] Actually, this role-play switch of gender did not challenge the gender frame itself.

At first, it caused no contradictions, as the larp community was considered by its participants as a safe and friendly environment to escape from the "large world," where eccentricities and oddities were acceptable, such as any kind of amateurish creativity, like writing songs or fiction; painting; or making fancy costumes. Unusual behavior was tolerated. In such an environment, crossplay did not look strange; it was just one more method of creative self-expression. The most important thing for larps of that period was the individual experience of a Tolkien world or some other fantasy world, such as *The Witcher* by A. Sapkovsky, with appropriate social interactions within the environment. The players' appearance and gender were much less important than the feeling of "being there." This experience was sustained by in-game partners verbally and behaviorally—in other words, by acting out—but it might not have been visually convincing.

As larps were developing, the standards of the visual aspect of performance evolved too. Individual role-playing, as always, depended on individual skills, but the requirements for props and costumes increased considerably; costumes, weapons, and props got more sophisticated. The crossgender play so typical to the 1990s through early 2000s in recent years led to passionate discussions and divided the larp community according to attitudes toward gender discrepancy between player and character.

A case that is commonly accepted as exemplarily perfect crossplay, which is referenced even nowadays: Nadezhda "Tinochka" Zinovieva portraying alchemist John Dee during the larp *XVI Century: A Step to Immortality* (2009), Tver' region. Photo by Valeria "Cadaloz" Tarasova.

Nowadays, crossplaying characters are rare with some exceptions (see below). The larger a larp is, the less possible meeting a crossplaying key character is. Apparently, in a small larp, it is easier to gather crossplay-tolerant players, while in a large larp, the central figures are more "visible," which means that the expectations of visual coherence between the character and its player are higher. At the same time, in a large larp, there are almost certainly some players and organizers who hate crossplay.

To Be or Not to Be a Male: Pros and Cons

In her comment to a survey of Nordic larp bodily techniques, Maria Razcynska discusses Russian crossplay and the arguments of its opponents:

> *No wonder that cross-gender is opposed mostly by men who try to protect their dominance. Their reasoning is of great variety: they say they can't speak both to a man and to a woman playing a man with the same sternness (yet, it is considered the woman's problem, and not the problem of this particular player); playing a conflict with a woman does not bring the same emotions; a woman playing a man will put more effort into it and will be less natural (than she would be while playing an old woman? An animal? An extraterrestrial intelligence? But these are not a problem); Finally, "a moustached female is simply odious!" Generally speaking, one will never see a woman playing a male role, "behave like a real man," even though such behaviour really is can only be told by the authors writing for women's magazines!*[6]

Thus, opponents of crossplay consider a girl playing a male role unconvincing, and interaction with such a girl as an inferior experience. Other explanations for the distaste toward crossplay adduce another reason: ambiguity makes players doubt whether they see a girl's female character behaving like a man, pretending to be perceived as a man, or a girl playing a male. Many players declare that "good" crossplay is acceptable, but upon closer inspection, what they mean by good is something impossible, so to accept "good" crossplay can actually be a form of its rejection.

1. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, translated by M. Barash (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1961).

2. *Editor's note:* This article mainly refers to gender in terms of societal definitions rather than personal gender identity. In this regard, gender in Russian society is strictly divided into male and female based upon biological sex and/or assigned gender.

3. Alexey Semenov, "Russian Larp History: The View from St. Petersburg," *in Playing Reality*, edited by Elge Larsson (Stockholm: Interacting Arts, 2010), 243-249.

4. For example, the novel *A Story About the Stone Bread* by Jana "Mirime" Timkova about a larp community in the late 1990s shows a charismatic female leader of a group of larpers who treats the girls as a courteous gentleman while switching to feminine flirting behavior if seeing a promising boy. It is crucial to note that in such cases, appearance and clothes are less important than behavior.

5. Dina Pisarevskaya, *Larp Subculture in Modern Society* (Moscow: Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of Russian Academy of Science, 2011) (in Russian).

6. Maria Raczynska, "What Shall I do with the Body They Gave Me?" in *Nordic-Russian Larp Dialog*, edited by Alexey Fedoseev, J. Tuomas Harviainen and Olga Vorobyeva (Moscow: ComCon, 2015), 99-101.

Stereotypical arguments exist in favor of crossplay acceptance. A wish to play a male character is, for a girl, an attempt to try a different gender role within a larp, an opportunity that could be provided by larp's creative freedom. Such girls are often inclined to practice masculine behavior off-game, particularly in the larp community, which is still widely considered a space for different kinds of self-expression. Although nowadays, the larp community allows less eccentricity than in the 1990s, some girls still use male nicknames as a part of their everyday habits as a playful self-identity without actual alternative gender orientation.

The main rational argument for crossplay is the lack of active female characters in historical or fictional game worlds. "Girls' playing" is an important issue in larp conventions and during preparation for historical larps: what can the girls do during the larp except sitting at the window and waiting for a prince to marry them? Thus, a female character turns out to be limited in opportunities of action; some girls tend to avoid this difficulty by choosing a male character if allowed by the organizers.

In game worlds without gender inequality—mostly in sci-fi larps—there are, correspondingly, less crossplay characters than in historical or fantasy larps. However, crossplay can cause discussions even in historical larps with explicit gender inequality. For instance, after the larp *1905* (2015, Moscow region) about the year 1905 in Russian history, one larp blogger considered crossplay in this larp as an off-game way to avoid in-game challenges, along with a stereotypical argument about the unconvincing manner of girls playing males.

> *One of the conflicts of this larp is the woman's place in the society. They are obviously discriminated upon. Some of women's rights were limited in the Russian Empire of 1905. And one could play this conflict, struggle for the rights, improve one's conditions. But one also could avoid this issue, choosing a crossplay character. And such [a] girl immediately gets the same rights as men have, before the larp and without in-game struggle.*
>
> *I suppose that at least partial prohibition of crossgender playing could have been fruitful for this larp. It is obvious that girls applying to such roles want to be at the same level as men in that society. Wonderful! If organizers had transformed this wish into in-game challenge, it would have improved the larp.*[7]

7. Warpo, "*1905*: Avoiding Issues," *Livejournal*, last modified August 4, 2015. http://warpo.livejournal.com/443383.html (in Russian).

An occasional female crossplayer: a girl portraying a monk. The costume is the main way of constructing a male image. *To Be a Monk* (2015), Moscow region. Photo by Alexandra "Heldenn" Koval.

Comments to this blogpost are illustrative of the argument about unconvincing play that presumably prevented the speakers from normal interaction with crossplaying characters, which sometimes led up to total refusal to communicate with them. One female poster wrote, "I couldn't be sure whether I see a suffragette in trousers or a crossplay character … I am outraged as a player, as I don't understand which reaction my character should choose." Another male larper stated, "We don't need crossplay. In this larp, it hurt me as never before. But now as always I hated them silently and avoided even approaching them."

In response, a female crossplayer objected, saying, "There is no problem with good crossplay. There are problems in the mind of people who fail to interact in-game." However, she was contradicted by another commenter, who replies, "Perhaps there would not be a problem to have [] good crossplay. But it is such an extremely rare occasion that it is more of a legend."[8] In actuality, the number of crossplaying characters in this larp was not higher than usual.

Another argument in defense of crossplay is the lack of good male players for important male roles. In some ways, it is the opposite side of the issue mentioned above—that is, the predominance of male prototypes in history and fiction—that causes predominance of male characters in larps. Thus, the organizer looking for active players for key roles—mostly males—sometimes has to compromise.

Keeping in mind this idea of the gender disproportion between players and characters, I turn to the data of the actual gender ratio within larp communities. According to Pisarevskaya,[9] the proportion between male and female players in the Russian larp community is about 1:1, while in some other countries—like the USA, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Estonia, or Denmark—male players are prevalent. Similar data are provided by the International Larp Census (2014).[10] The table below includes the countries mentioned by Pisarevskaya, with the addition of other Nordic countries, and excludes communities whose data cannot be considered reliable due to the insufficient number of respondents (less than 500).

8. Ibid.

9. Dina Pisarevskaya, *Larp Subculture in Modern Society* (Moscow: Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of Russian Academy of Science, 2011) (in Russian).

10. Larp Census, "Results," Larpcensus.org, accessed November 22, 2015, http://larpcensus.org/results/en. The question was "What gender do you identify as?" The percentages of "Non-binary" and "Prefer not to answer" answers are excluded; thus, the sum in each country is less than 100%.

Figure 1: Percentage of male and female larpers in several countries.

Country	Female, %	Male, %
Average proportion	**35**	**65**
Italy	28	69
Denmark	29	68
UK	32	63
USA	36	60
Norway	40	57
Sweden	43	52
Russia	**44**	**54**
Finland	49	44

As the table shows, the number of female larpers in the Russian community is higher than average. In the Nordic countries, the proportion varies dramatically from less than 30% female in Denmark up to the predominance of female larpers in Finland, with the Swedish proportions being close to the Russian ones. This issue might mean that it is not the actual gender proportion that leads to crossplay, but rather it can turn out to be a reason adduced by the members of the Russian community in order to account for crossplay.

There are ways besides crossplay to overcome the functional disproportion of male and female characters by means of plot and setting design. For example, the small larp *Smolny College: At the Dawn of Life* (2014, Moscow region, 40 participants) about the upbringing of noble girls in the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century, was declared a "larp for girls," where men had auxiliary roles aiming to make girls' play more intense and interesting. The peak of this approach was the scene of graduate prom: organizers secretly brought a dozen male NPCs portraying the girls' relatives for the ball, which was a great surprise for the female players. It is noticeable that even in this larp, there was a male character portrayed by a girl, which illustrates the fact that crossplay depends on the player's wish much more than on external reasons like the gender disproportion of characters.

Besides the negative attitudes toward crossplay, there are also some stereotypical ideas about the advantages of women playing male characters. For instance, some female larpers think that a girl portraying a male would be more attentive and sensitive in interactions while playing romantic relations with girls, whereas male players feel uncomfortable or lack the time or motivation to develop a convincing and nuanced image. Presumably, a female crossplayer having the experience of female socialization is able to provide female partners with what they might lack in both larp and real life communication with male partners.

Thus, while some Russian larps explicitly reject crossplay, some allow separate crossplaying roles, although a small number of specialty projects put no limits to crossplay. It appears most tolerable when performed by girls who regularly crossplay male characters, so that members of the larp community are accustomed to seeing them in male roles.

Crossplay-friendly larps are usually organized by teams with girls who regularly play crossgender roles. Other kinds of crossplay-friendly larps aim to provide male characters with a particular experience that is unavailable to female characters. For instance, *To Be a Monk* (2015, Moscow region) was a larp about a friary in the thirteenth century, where monks were played by both male and female players. This larp is a convenient case for exploring the diversity of gender roles in Russian larps. If we formulate it in terms of the hierarchy of in-game opportunities, it would be as follows:

- "True" males on the top of hierarchy. Male players portrayed most of the managing of characters, all priests, and most key characters;
- "Regular" female crossplayers, which means girls who often portray male characters. They have some experience in it and, at the same time, the community is accustomed to viewing them as male characters. These girls often have short haircuts and sometimes they really look like boys, which helps people perceive them as their male roles.
- Occasional female crossplayers, which means girls who portray male characters rarely or for the first time. Male players often treat them as if they were women, e.g., preventing these characters from carrying heavy things or forgetting to call them "he." At the same time, the rank of such players was quite low within the implicit social hierarchy of the larp world. They hardly had key or managing roles and they often played with each other, as they rarely found themselves in a "true" male community, especially in the case of important in-game decision-making. It is remarkable that novice monks were all played by girls.

Female characters had explicit prohibitions for some in-game actions; thus, they could not be priests and some in-game crafts were unavailable to them. This was not surprise to players, as the medieval society represented in the larp was overtly patriarchic, so these prohibitions were known in advance.

What It Actually Looks Like

Male characters performed by female larpers use male costumes. Girls do not use make-up and jewelry and hide long hair in a ponytail or under a wig. Grease paint, fake mustaches, or beards are seldom used—moreover, painted mustaches are more widespread than those made of hairs—but girls use chest bondage in order to hide the breasts. Other visual aspects, like nail color, are usually out of focus and are not regarded as contradicting the image. To what extent masculine walking and gestures are imitated varies greatly across larpers.

This arbitrary choice of aspects that are considered relevant and those that are disregarded can seem funny to an outside observer. Participants of the larp community seem not to be aware of this lack of consistency. It is not nail varnish that makes performance convincing to partners, and the whole issue of the convincing performance of crossplaying characters is a special case of the broader problem of how a player's appearance corresponds to the image of the character. Potentially conflictual discussions on whether "Galadriel can wear glasses" or whether "a princess can be ugly" are quite similar to the comments about the appearance of male characters performed by female players.

Non-Mainstream Crossplay in Larps

Some special events, such as balls and larps[11] with carnivalesque *travesty*, can include "total crossgender playing": all female players portray male characters, and vice versa. According to what Mikhail Bakhtin wrote about carnival in medieval popular culture, "[a]s opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions."[12]

11. For example, *Mask and Stiletto* (2009, St. Petersburg) based on the novels of Vera Kamsha or the larp ball *War and Peace* (2013, St. Petersburg) with characters from the work of Leo Tolstoy.

12. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

Left: A Republican doctor. Typical crossplay of a female playing a male: male clothes, breast bondage, and painted moustaches. Protective glasses are not a part of the image, but an off-game safety requirement. *No Pasarán! Hemos Pasado!* (2012), Moscow region. Photo by the "Holy Guns" group.

Right: An example of a double gender switch: to the left, a male player portraying a male character who has taken an androgyne potion and thus must perform female behavior and appearance for some time, a kind of carnivalesque travesty; to the right, a female larper who crossplays regularly portraying a male character, which is a normal, "serious" performance. Person to the right is visibly surprised and pleased to see her co-player in this role. Larp campaign *Hogsmead Seasons*, 2013, St. Petersburg region. Photo by Valeria "Cadaloz" Tarasova.

Thus, carnival travesty implies the inversion of existing gender roles. This feature is reproduced in these larp projects, which are positively accepted within the larp community, supposedly because of their explicitly experimental approach and carnival spirit; they do not pretend to be "normal" or "serious" larps. It seems that "total crossplay" larps are the main socially acceptable way of providing the female character experience to male players.

Besides this type of play, which involves general crossdressing during the entire event, some game worlds allow for a temporary crossdressing. The so-called androgyne potion in the *Hogwarts Seasons* larp campaign (2006-2011, St. Petersburg) and related larps is a good example. This potion can change a character's gender for certain time. As a rule, such gender switching did not pursue any practical character goals, such as winning or healing, but was used just for fun as a joke. Male-to-female switching caused by the potion arose more enthusiasm among players, especially if this new female image was given to a male character portrayed by a male player. Moreover, male players could use strategically the fact that their character could be ignorant about the potion secretly poured into their drink, pretending to be a victim. Since ordinary crossplaying was widely used during this campaign, there was a special gender marker for the characters to avoid mistakes: wearing a skirt was mandatory for female characters, as was wearing trousers for males.

It seldomly occurs that a male player applies for a female character in an ordinary larp, but such characters are less than ordinary and considered comic. The larp community does not regard such experiments negatively.

News about some larp events can only get limited circulation when the larp is produced by a certain creative group with a definite target audience and is not addressed to the "large" larp community. Thus, for instance, there is a small closed larp community consisting mostly of girls whose larps are based on "female" game worlds, mainly taken from books by the writer Vera Kamsha. This community shares particular aesthetics and norms; almost all male characters including key figures are performed by girls. It is not a "girls only" community, however, as they accept men who accept their style and are ready to follow their rules. Being a closed group, "Kamsha Club" does not attract much public attention within the mainstream larp community.

Quite a different example of a "girls only" event was *Winchester College* (2015, Moscow region) representing a British male private college. All characters were performed by female players, but unlike "Kamsha Club" larps, this event was held within the mainstream community and hence was expected to follow its standards. Since it did not conform due to the number of female crossplayers, participants were accused of various sins. The fact that several characters in this larp were homosexual added fuel to the flames, as characters' homosexuality together with crossplaying was too much for many of the mainstream larp community members. One female poster said, "I am afraid of … girls crossplaying gentle gays. … The worst thing is that they consider it normal. But this is NOT normal. They must not bring this bullshit to the larp

community where I play." A male larper agreed, stating, "Crossplaying character in order to be a man is bad. Playing a man [as] a girl in order to play homosexuality with her female friends is even worse."[13]

Homosexuality, especially male homosexuality, is commonly treated with aversion in Russian society, and this attitude is also relevant for the Russian larp community. Once, there was an attempt to represent an in-game gay community within a large mainstream dystopian larp (*Cost of Life*, 2011, Moscow region), which totally unbalanced the larp plot; other groups of characters started to struggle against gays instead of solving their own problems. Therefore, when girls did not only play male characters, but also chose gay characters, this practice turned out to be scandalous.

Comparative Data on Crossplay

Larp communities in other countries differ in their attitude toward crossplay, which probably has to do with not only particular larp traditions, but also with broader societal values as well. Below, I try to expose some features of larp in the Nordic countries (mostly Denmark and Sweden), Italy, and Latvia, so that the Russian tradition can be viewed against their background.

It seems that Nordic larpers are tolerant to expressions of off-game gender and sexual identity much more than to in-game gender variations. For instance, the Nordic community accepts open expressions of male homosexuality, which is intolerable in Russia, but in most cases, Nordic larpers cannot choose their characters' gender. At the same time, the Nordic countries in general, as well as the Nordic larp communities, are known for their attention to gender issues and overtly feminist discourse. That is why I was surprised when I found that crossgender playing is very seldom practiced there. I will take a closer look at possible explanations, some of which are provided by larp community members.

Nordic larps are famous for the WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") principle[14] and what is called the "360-degree illusion."[15] These terms mean that the visual aspect of larps is given much importance and detailed visual representation of the game world is proclaimed as a goal. No nail varnish would be acceptable for a Viking and the castle is represented by a castle, the village by a village, and even the submarine, by a real museified submarine. Many Nordic players try to represent their characters visually in the smallest details, up to "medieval underwear," according to Johanna Koljonen.[16] Consequently, a Nordic larper of any gender can hardly imagine playing a character of the opposite sex, because he or she could not be sure of *looking* proper and up to the standard.

Both Nordic and Russian larpers have to deal with male-centric game worlds, such as the medieval period, combat larps, etc. However, medieval larps are not so often held in the Nordic community nowadays, due both to difficulties with the detailed representation of the game world and to the fact that the world involves a women's position that contradicts the values of contemporary Nordic societies.[17]

As an alternative, they often play a sort of fantasy larp where all social roles from ruler to craftsman are not gender-determined. Moreover, there are "matriarchic" larps where stereotypical masculine behavior is proper to female characters, and vice versa; women are heads of their families, rulers, counselors etc., while men have to obey, care for children, and cook. A male participant of such a larp in Sweden remarked that male participants are glad to play such "upside down" situations, but it can be difficult for some female players to take the leading role and to provide intense play for their "subordinates."[18]

Speaking about stereotypical male boffer larps, Nordic female players complain that they hardly can find a suitable role for themselves. For instance, in the Nordic Larp Talks 2015, Danish feminist Ann Eriksen presented a story about organizing a female fighting team within the boffer larp campaign *Warlarp* (also known as *Krigslive*, Denmark, since 2006) based on the *Warhammer* game world.[19] The larp was not supposed to be historical and did not expect deep immersion.[20] Before 2009, girls could take part in this campaign in auxiliary roles only, for example, being a cook; there were no independent female fighters. As a result, gender proportion was about 1:30. In 2009, Ann Eriksen organized a female fighting team called "Girls in Armour" in order to participate in *Warlarp*. At first, they faced a strong rejection from male players. Only constant work with public opinion—particularly, establishing an official organization and creating a supportive social net—let them continue promoting their ideas on a more comprehensive female presence in boffer larps.

Russian larpers who attended this presentation were astonished by this story, as in Russia, there are no limitations for female players to participate in any kind of larps, combat trainings, or tournaments. The only requirement is enough motivation to develop muscle force and learning to manage one's weapon, which is needed because in Russian larps until recently, there were no light boffer or latex weapons (see details about the weaponry in my article on symbolic acts in Russian larps).[21] If a girl is not ready to fight against men face-to-face as a foot soldier, she can become an archer; the bow is often considered a female weapon, as it does not require much physical strength and armory, and, at the same time, a distance weapon causes less occasional injury. Nowadays, as boffer weapons spread among Russian larp communities, strength is not so important anymore. Even this superficial comparison shows that the lack of female players in Danish boffer larps is only a matter of the traditions of the local community.

As we can see, the issues that are solved in Russian larps using partial female crossplay or making "women's play" within a larp, in Nordic communities can be either dealt with by escaping the problem, that is, by refusing to organize a historic larp and rejecting female participation, or by affirmative action that mirrors a male-centered system. Russsian "women's play" implies a special set of rules and approaches available for female characters only. A good example of "women's play" took place in *Rome: Republic in Danger* (2015, Moscow region); men could adopt laws in the Senate and thereby influence the game world directly, while women could choose a patron god of the day, who influenced the evaluation of any actions during this day. For instance, cheating in Mercurius' day was an approved action, while in Jove's day, it was a great crime. In this way, women could influence the game world on a macroscale.

An article by Danish feminist Jofrid Regitzesdatter uncovers the trends of Nordic gender issues in larps. The author describes some cases of what she regards as successes and failures in gender-related larp design. For instance, when she was offered to portray a male character in the boffer larp campaign *Krigslive* (see above) because there were no female characters in the group she wanted to join, unlike a Russian player for whom this would mean quite an ordinary crossplay, she was outraged: "The fiction offered no identity positions that could encompass my female body if I wanted to fight and therefore my body would have to be disciplined to 'fit' the gender norms contained within the Warhammer fiction."[22] Thus, the set of characters did not suit her female body according to gender habitus and portraying a man contradicted her creeds. As positive examples, the larps *Hamlet* (2000, Sweden) and *Carolus Rex* (1999, Sweden) are listed. In these larps, characters were gender neutral—like "Kornelius/Kornelia"—which allowed for a more flexible distribution of characters between players. At the same time, in the game world, gender neutral character increased the probability of homosexual relationships between characters and thereby enlarged gender and sexuality diversity.

I found a sort of gender neutral approach in Russian larps only once, but it concerned portraying animal characters. The rule set for the larp *Alice? Wonderland is Behind the Mirror* (2015, St. Petersburg) states, "Some words about crossplay. We suppose its absence. But in English, words for animals are usually grammatically gender neutral, and so, a unicorn's or walrus's gender is a complicated question. But you should remember that if you are a girl, you will be addressed to as a girl." This statement means that a character's gender definitely depends on the player's gender, but at the same time, any player's gender is accepted.

Once, I faced the necessity of adapting of the Nordic gender neutral approach to the Russian larp scene when we were adopting an international project *Baltic Warriors* (2015, Finland) for St. Petersburg. The problem was as follows: all characters were written as gender neutral, but some of them had sexual affairs with each other. At the same time, the game world was selected

13. Miss Vondorn, "Nightmares of the Day," *Livejournal*, last modified April 6, 2015, http://miss-vondorn.livejournal.com/62726.html (in Russian).

14. Jaakko Stenros, "What Does 'Nordic Larp' Mean?" in *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp*, edited by Jon Back (Knutpunkt, 2014), 147-156.

15. Johanna Koljonen, "Eye-witness to the Illusion: An Essay on the Impossibility of 360° Role-playing," in *Lifelike*, edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, Line Thorup (Copenhagen: Knudepunkt, 2007), 175-188.

16. Ibid.

17. *Editor's note:* This observation may include traditional mainstream larps in the category of Nordic larp, which more commonly refers to avant-garde role-playing in the Knutpunkt tradition.

18. I am grateful to Eric Pihl (Stockholm, Sweden) for this information.

19. Ann Eriksen, "Girls in Armour: A Danish Feminist Movement," *Nordic Larp Talks*, last modified February 12, 2015. http://nordiclarptalks.org/girls-in-armour-a-danish-feminist-movement-ann-kristine-eriksen/.

20. Eriksen implies the Nordic opposition between "boffer larps" with a gamist creative agenda, and "immersion larps" without combat, but with deep experiences of social interactions. In Russia, "combat" and "immersion" are not opposites; although there are "combat larps" without elaborated characters, "immersion larps" quite always imply deep social interactions and inner experience as well as combat.

21. Olga Vorobyeva, "Entering and Leaving the 'Magic Circle' as Symbolic Acts: The Case of Russian Field Larps," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014), 76-87. https://www.dropbox.com/s/3yq12w0ygfhj5h9/2014%20Wyrd%20Academic%20Book.pdf?dl=0

22. Jofrid Regitzesdatter, "Doing Gender at Larp," in *Think Larp: Academic writings from KP 2011*, edited by Thomas Duus Henriksen, Christian Bierlich, Kasper Friis Hansen, and Valdemar Kolle (Copenhagen: Rollespieltakademiet, 2011), 70-85.

to be "contemporary Russia." For me, it was obvious that Russian larpers would not accept this approach because of the dominant values of the broader society and also because of the dominant attitudes within the larp community. According to the designers, it was not supposed to be a problem, but in Russia, it was. Playing homosexual relationships is a rather complicated issue; very few larpers are ready to play homosexuality, and even fewer can play it with a random partner. In adapting the larp, I had to "fix" the gender of characters who were supposed to have love affairs and let the rest of characters remain gender neutral.

As a perfect solution, Regitzesdatter proposes a total "move outside the heterosexual gender matrix,"[23] like in Eliot Wieslander's *Mellan himmel och hav*[24] (2003, Sweden). Characters were divided not into men and women, but to "morning" and "evening" people. The larp implied sexual activities and even reproduction, but the dividing point was shifted from players' and characters' biological sex.

Still, the Nordic scene accepts crossplay in the form of an experiment. Thus, the larp *Mad About the Boy*[25] (2010, Norway) portrayed a setting where only one male was left in the world. It had two runs in 2010, with the first accepting female players only to play female characters, while the second run allowed both male and female players to portray women. This case, in some ways, mirrors the situation with Russian females playing males in crossplay as a tool to provide participants with some unique experiences (see the case of *To Be a Monk*). Both the Russian and Norwegian cases are exceptions for their larp cultures, as they provide an opportunity to switch the gender of any volunteer of a certain sex rather than to "regular crossplayers" only.

Having analyzed both Nordic and Russian approaches, I come to an important conclusion: in Russian larps, the border between male and female characters is stable, but by means of crossplaying, larpers (mostly girls) can join one group of characters or another. Additionally, the gender border can be enhanced with the fact that different tools are provided by the rules for male and female characters. In the case of Nordic larps, this border tends to be challenged in several ways, such as: ignoring the absence of female characters in the game world; neutralizing gender issues; shifting the border from sex to another feature. The Russian way seen against this background leads to enhancing the border, not just recognizing its existence.

Speaking about crossgender playing in other larp communities, I have some non-systematic data about Italy and Latvia. In brief, in Italy, which also supports the WYSIWYG-principle, the approach to gender issues is similar to the Nordic one: my Italian informants can remember a couple of cases of male players portraying old women as comic characters.[26] Alternatively, in Latvian RPGs, both tabletop and larp, crossgender playing is similar to that of Russian games:

> Role-playing characters of the opposite gender, while not a typical practice, had been undertaken or accepted by the majority; this is especially common during tabletop role-playing games, where enactments [are] only imagined, and rarely in live action role-playing games, where all actions have to be performed. Playing a character of the opposite sex is possible in role-playing games, but often is seen as a difficult performance undertaken to show off a role-player's theatrical or comic skills. [27]

I have no grounds for conclusions about whether Latvian crossplaying is a result of the influence of the Russian larp community, of the Russian-speaking Latvian larp community, or an endogenous phenomenon, but it seems crucial that the props in Latvia as quite far from the "360-degree illusion," as are Russian ones.

Summary

In Russia, portraying a character of another gender, although often negatively perceived by larpers, performs some important functions for both the local larp community in general and individual players. First, the larp community regards crossgender playing as an example of a player's free will and co-creative freedom, which is an important value for the group. Second, female crossgender playing helps to provide a necessary balance between male and female characters. For girls, crossgender playing is an attempt to play with manners and appearance, a kind of a fitting room for expressions of masculinity that either are not available to them in everyday life, or, for some of them, are a continuation of their off-game image within the larp community.

Comparative perspectives between the Russian and Nordic traditions show that both larp communities have developed tools for supporting their gender attitudes, such as "women's play" in Russia and "gender neutral" game design in Nordic larps. Russian crossgender playing, although providing freedom to particular players, helps to support existing gender role frames: a cross-player just changes sides, while the whole system remains stable in accordance with Russian broader society's attitudes towards gender roles. The dominant lack of crossplaying and very limited possibility of choosing one's character's gender in Nordic larps implies an attempt to challenge the gender role frame system. Choosing and saving one's off-game gender identity appears to be more important for Nordic players than the freedom to switch gender within game environment.

23. Ibid.

24. Eliot Wieslander and Katarina Björk, *Mellan himmel och hav* (Sweden, 2003).

25. Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine L. Lindahl, and Margrete Raaum, "*Mad About the Boy*," in *Do Larp. Documentary Writings from KP 2011*, edited by Lars Andresen, Charles Bo Nielsen, Luisa Carbonelli, Jesper Heebøll-Christensen and Marie Oscilowski (Copenhagen: Rollespieltakademiet, 2011), 92-107.

26. I am grateful to Chiara Tirabasso and Francesco Pregliasco (Turin, Italy) for this information.

27. Agnese Dzervite, *"Carnivalesque" Gender and Sexuality Norms Transgressions in Latvian Leisure Role-playing Games* (Master's thesis, Amsterdam, 2007).

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Imagining the Future with *Planetfall*: Mobile Technology and Hard Science in Science Fiction Larping

Matthew Webb

"In science fiction, we dream. In order to colonize in space, to rebuild our cities, which are so far out of whack, to tackle any number of problems, we must imagine the future, including the new technologies that are required." —Ray Bradbury[1]

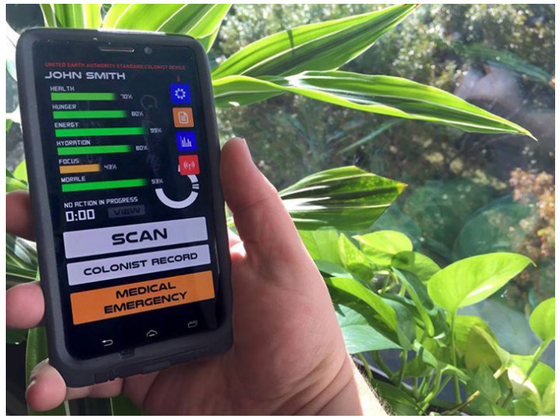
Light years away from Earth, a collection of loyalists, misfits, and rebels take the first steps toward humanity's first colony outside of our solar system—the expendable few that went first into the night. Humanity has survived a dark age, where environmental and political collapse heralded in an oppressive totalitarian government. An expendable few have been chosen to take the first risky steps and were sent to a new star. And something has gone wrong.

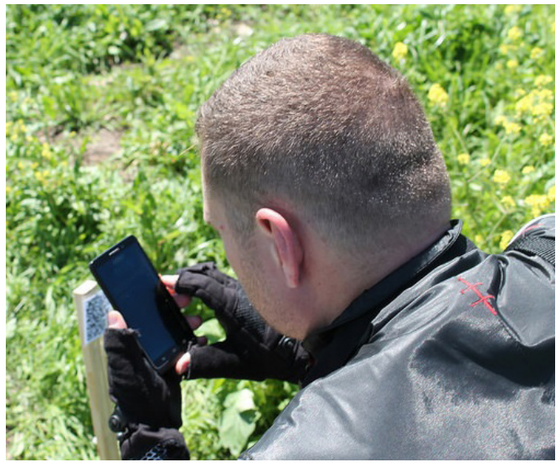
In the American campaign larp *Planetfall*, the characters are colonists trying to survive on an unfamiliar world using their wits, their knowledge, and their perseverance. The political divisions and lines inform the interaction between characters, much like other colonizations in our past.

The *Planetfall* game describes itself as a hard science fiction larp. The larp is founded on the principles of scientific realism and philosophical exploration that underlined what author J.G. Ballard describes as "an almost invisible literature" from which "sprung the intact reality of the 20th century."[2]

Assisting us in realizing a hard science fiction game, we turned to mobile technology, augmented reality, and the use of computers whenever possible. This served to streamline the live action experience. With these tools, we were able to create an immersive future world that asks tough and interesting questions about our present day world, our future, and ourselves in the best traditions of science fiction.

After being in development for two years, the alpha stage of *Planetfall* was launched in 2014. The game is managed by myself and Riley Seaman. It moved in beta testing in Fall 2015 and the game is still under testing and development.





Clockwise from top left: The *Planetfall* app, including character stats. Photo by Matthew Webb.

***Planetfall* creators Riley Seaman (left) and Matthew Webb (right). PHOTO BY SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN.**

A character scans a QR code to get information on an object based on his skills.

In preparation for this article, we conducted a survey of the players for quotes and responses via Internet form. We received 10 responses from our player base of approximately 40 players.

Inspiration and Influences

The world of Planetfall is my own creation, but I draw from a deep history of science fiction literature. I grew up in a house full of cheap decades-old science fiction paperbacks. I read my father's collection throughout my childhood, from long-forgotten gems like *Dawn in Andromeda* by E.C. Large and *Cities in Flight* by James Blish, to milestone works like Larry Niven's *Ringworld* and Isaac Asimov's *Caves of Steel*. This practice developed my taste for the "literature of ideas." That taste was nurtured alongside the explosion of science fiction into mainstream media that coincided with my own childhood and adolescence, typified by *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

This explosion followed me into my other hobby of role-playing games. I found the *Traveller* and *GURPS Space* games more to my tastes than *Dungeons & Dragons*, although I entered larping through the strange mix of science fiction and horror that is Lovecraft's weird fiction by playing *Cthulhu Live*.

In the meantime, I became a software engineer by profession, working in the arena of web applications and simulations software. I became friends through the larp community with Riley Seaman, another software developer and the other lead game master of *Planetfall*.

The challenge that prompted *Planetfall*'s creation was: how could we create a compelling and smart science fiction larp game with a hard sci-fi setting that mimicked the works of our favorite authors like Larry Niven and Frederik Pohl, was fun, and could run as a continuous campaign game? We decided that by leveraging mobile technology and computers, along with our appreciation of the genre and our combined years of experience running games, we could create a game that not only captured what we loved about science fiction, but actually solved and streamlined the problems many larps face.

Apart from tackling the technical issues, I immersed myself in research into the science fiction genre with a new focus on hard science fiction authors. I wrapped myself up in the history of the genre, reading histories of science fiction's development from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* onward. I especially liked Brian Aldiss' opinionated, but fantastic history text *Trillion Year Spree*. It was an enlightening experience tackling my favorite books from a more scholarly context.

While I had a sense of the divisions within the genre just by reading them, I began to see the story behind them. I began to appreciate the influence of seminal editors like Hugo Gernsback of *Amazing Stories* and John W. Campbell of *Astounding Science Fiction*—now called *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*—that led to their names being attached to entire styles of science fiction. To this day, Gernsback is synonymous with overblown and colorful visions of the future with flying cars and pointy rocketships; alternately, Campbellian describes my preferred genre of science fiction, which emphasizes smart ideas that give an appreciation for science and advocate for the potential of technology and human development.

While the literature gave an intellectual foundation for the game, larp requires a visual foundation as well. Luckily, science fiction television and film have similar challenges when it comes to budget and scope. Embracing the visuals of gritty science fiction films also created a low barrier to entry for costuming and made prop creation easier. The *Alien* series of films —*Alien, Aliens*, etc.—was an excellent baseline for costuming and set dressing, along with the British sci-fi series *Outcasts*. Following after them, we could use sportswear, army surplus, and outdoor gear to create a familiar, low cost science fiction look that was easy to require of our players.

We also looked at massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) for pointers on how to create automated systems to drive player interaction. We were impressed especially

1. Ray Bradbury, "Ray Bradbury Quote," *Izquotes*, accessed November 22, 2015.

2. J.G. Ballard, "Fictions of Every Kind," *Books & Bookmen*, February 1971, http://www.jgballard.ca/non_fiction/jgb_fictions.html.

Top: Unification Forces officers oversee the colony.

Bottom: UEA Enforcer.
PHOTOS BY SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN.

by *Eve Online*, a popular MMO with complicated resource gathering and economics set in a far future where completely player-driven corporations and alliances drive most of the action. Also, we looked at sandbox video games with strong crafting and gathering components, such as *Minecraft*, *Project Zomboid,* and *Space Engineers.*

As I spoke about the project to others, I also connected with people running science fiction games elsewhere in the world. In particular, Martin Vano, who ran the *Střepiny* sci-fi larp in the Czech Republic, provided invaluable advice on his own experiences integrating technology into a game.

Writing the History of the Future

History does not always repeat itself. Sometimes it just yells, "Can't you remember anything I told you?" and lets fly with a club.—John W. Campbell[3]

Following the best traditions of science fiction, the *Planetfall* setting exaggerates themes from our present to create an evocative setting that tackles important ideas. The planet of Medina is thirty-six light years from Earth, orbiting a fictional star. The characters were selected for a high-risk initial colonization mission: a combination of loyalists, dissidents, profiteers, and undesirables with the skills and backgrounds to be useful, but still be expendable. This mission is one of three ships that are Earth's first attempts at interstellar colonization using a "slow" faster-than-light drive, taking five years to make the journey.

They left an Earth very different than our own. The late twenty-first century was disastrous. A nightmare climate change scenario played out, combined with overpopulation and human conflict. When the dust settled, a totalitarian world government formed out of mass movements within the few functioning nation-states. This government evolved into the United Earth Authority, driven by a radical utilitarian philosophy that derided the weakness and indecision of our present-day capitalist democracies while also condemning the ideals of philosophical movements—Communism, Libertarianism, etc.—that thought they could overcome humankind's inherent weaknesses, or prioritized anything above human survival —nationalism, animal rights, environmentalism, etc.

Using data-mining and mass surveillance to judge citizens by their "memetic fitness"—how well their ideals and behavior served the continued survival of the human race – the UEA stratified society. This new society, based on scarcity, uses algorithms and data to decide who may have to starve, which derides the idea that with a population of 15 billion and the species' survival in the balance, any single human life is precious.

Unsure of the continued survival of humanity, the discovery of a faster-than-light drive was seen as a method of finally ensuring the continued survival of the species. FTL offered an opportunity for those who were undesirable on Earth to find some modicum of freedom in the stars, to mimic many frontier and colonization stories. Philosophies and factions in the game range from ones we would recognize—e.g., "Utopian" advocates for democracy, human rights, communism, capitalism, etc.—and newer fictional movements founded in the post-collapse world's scarcity—e.g., the Technical Doctrine, based on operating society according to the laws of thermodynamics. I should note that the political beliefs of this dystopian regime and the other factions do not reflect my own, but rather reflect thought experiments about the future.

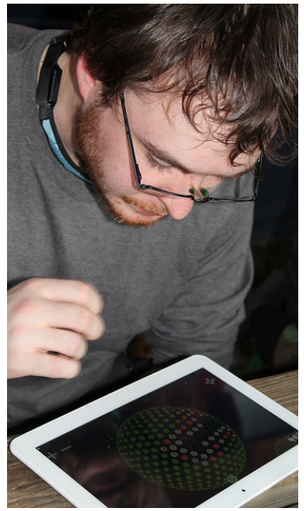
Using New Media to Promote Background Literacy

Background in science fiction settings is very important. Asking a random player to portray an orc or an elf in a fantasy game is relatively easy to fake. They usually share common traits and attitudes. Science fiction settings tend to be far more specific. The difference between an Imperial officer in *Star Wars* and a Starfleet officer in *Star Trek* is vast, and playing one as the other would not fit within the world's fiction. To have an immersive and player-moderated experience, we had to create good group competency on the game's fictional background.

To assist in this goal, the staff created four videos, using pictures, small snippets of film footage, and other methods to create a documentary-style film of the history of our world from now until the game's start.[4]. This compact form allowed players to quickly absorb a great deal of history and context, and was highly successful as both an educational tool and a promotional tool. As one player said, "The videos are a great way to get your head into the world of the game. They explain the history in a way that is very interesting."

We also produced trailers for different factions,[5] as well as video blog discussions[6] by myself and others on developing rules and answering questions about the fictional world. This practice also led to players creating their own video content—both in-character and out-of-character.

We encourage player-generated content whenever possible. A player-driven wiki[7] is managed by the player base, recording colonist records, trivia about factions and philosophies, and new discoveries on the alien world. One of our players, a sociology student with a taste of linguistics Michael Bushee, took to making his own instructional videos[8] and faux academic papers. These artifacts are explored later in the article.



Top: UEA Commander puts pressure on a Triad engineer to finish a project.

Middle: A synthetic biologist character plays a mini-game to simulate analyzing an alien bacteria.

Bottom: The colonists devise a makeshift brain scanning device, extrapolating from plausible scientific principles. Photo by Sarah Lynne Bowman.
ALL PHOTOS BY SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN.

3. John W. Campbell, "John W. Campbell Quote," *Izquotes*, accessed November 22, 2015.

4. Prepare for Planetfall, "Planetfall History Playlist," *YouTube,* last modified September 17, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLBTcUVAqJRQqXrjfBhS9nivFVIQuNWhU5&v=TFATpYdaP2s.

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Designing Hard Science Fiction into Larp

When we began designing the *Planetfall* universe, we decided on what we wanted to accomplish and what we wanted to avoid. The end goal was always achieving a hard science fiction experience.

What is Hard Science Fiction?

Science fiction is the art of the possible. It could happen. It has happened.—Ray Bradbury[9]

The most important decision in the design of *Planetfall* was deciding our science fiction would be "hard." A firm definition of science fiction is elusive, but hard science fiction can be defined as the subgenre of science fiction characterized by an emphasis on scientific accuracy, technical detail, or both. More prominent in literary sci-fi than in film or television, the subgenre sets itself in contrast to "soft science fiction," which lacks a scientific focus or rigorous adherence to known science. Hard science fiction sets itself even further from science fantasy, where the tropes and visuals of science fiction are used, but the events and universe are wholly unrealistic and fantastic.

Whether or not something is actually "hard" science fiction has resulted in literally decades of verbal trench warfare in science fiction fandom, but my favorite scale is known as Mohs Scale of Science Fiction Hardness—a pun on Mohs Scale of Mineral Hardness.[10]. Rating from 1 to 6 in increasing hardness:

1) **Science Fiction in Genre Only:** It is set in the literary genre of science fiction and uses science fiction tropes, but makes no attempt to even be vaguely scientifically accurate and often incorporates many fantasy elements. Examples: *Futurama*, *Star Wars, The Avengers*

2) **World of Phlebotinum:** Phlebotinum is used as a short hand for any various "wonder technologies" or substances in science fiction that can apparently produce any effects the plot calls for. However, they are at least dealt with consistently. Examples: *Star Trek, Farscape*

9. University of California Television (UCTV), "A Conversation with Ray Bradbury," *YouTube*, January 31, 2008, 29:02. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UU51N2s3B78.

10. TV Tropes, "Mohs Scale of Science Fiction Hardness," TvTropes.org, accessed November 23, 2015, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MohsScaleOfScienceFictionHardness.

Top: A soldier fends off an attack from an aggressive native species.

Center: The game masters emphasize the planet as a living ecosystem, populating with animals not monsters. Here, players interact with a buffalo-like animal, using their scanners to learn more about it.

Bottom: A scientist analyzes an indigenous bird species, represented by a puppet operated by staff. ALL PHOTOS BY SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN.

Top: A player retrieves a QR code from an indigenous lifeform's corpse. The scanned code will reveal additional information for each relevant level of skill that the character possesses.

Bottom: A character receives the results of a scan, revealing the presence of edible plant life on Medina. ALL PHOTOS BY SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN.

3) **Physics Plus:** While ultimately unrealistic super-technologies or situations exist, the creator justifies them by extrapolating from real or invented physical laws. Quantum physics and antimatter are perennial favorites. Examples: *Terminator*, *Battlestar Galactica, Ringworld*

4) **One Big Lie:** The creator asserts only one (or very few) counterfactual devices, and makes sure they operate in a consistent manner. The rest of the fiction is mostly realistic. Examples: *Ender's Game, The Time Machine*

5) **Speculative Science:** The science that is presented is genuinely extrapolated from modern day theories or technology. It passes most plausibility tests, though it might get small details wrong. Examples: *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Neuromancer, Gattaca, Jurassic Park*

6) **Real Life:** The hardest science fiction is non-fiction, the scale cheekily asserts. As TV Tropes notes, real life is one of the most elaborate settings ever conceived and thoroughly worked out on scientific principles. Examples: *Wyrd Con, New York City, World War 2*

Planetfall strives to hover between 5 and 4.5, what is called *One Small Fib*. Our primary conceit is our faster than light drive, but even that is based loosely on speculative faster than light drives currently under consideration by NASA. We intentionally keep the details on it vague; the device is massive and stuck in orbit, so its particulars have no bearing on our story, and none of the characters are experts on its design.

A few other hand waves exist—such as our non-combat characters being biologically synthetic androids whose technology is not fully explored—but we try to keep such technology simply unexplained as opposed to unexplainable.

No Space Nazis, Space Wizards, or Space Elves

Our experience with both the science fiction genre and other science fiction larps established some tropes we intended to avoid in our game, which kept us close to the hard science fiction ideal. We established a three part mantra: No Space Nazis, No Space Wizards, No Space Elves.

No Space Nazis

Science fiction often includes repackaged historical political groups or philosophies, given little more than some cosmetic changes and launched into space. The Nazis in Space, a group of aggressive militant fascists obviously styled after Hitler's Germany, is a recurring theme. Sometimes they even sport the black Hugo Boss uniforms, like the Empire in *Star Wars*. Many variations on this trope exist: Space Communists, Space Hippies, Space French Aristocrats.

We wanted to avoid this trope. While useful to creators because it provides easily identified groups, we wanted the politics of our twenty-third century future to bear as much resemblance to our own as ours resembles

Top: Medics treat a wounded character.

Bottom: Doctors remove an indigenous parasite from another character's brain. PHOTOS BY TODD COLE.

the politics of Napoleonic Europe two hundred years ago. In keeping with science fiction's history of coming up with new and challenging ideas, we strived to make our factions feel like plausible products of two centuries of development while still being connected to our world.

No Space Wizards and No Space Elves

Whether you call it psychic powers, nanite fields or the like, *Planetfall* would be magic-free. Also, the characters would be human, all too human. There would be no races, strains, or bloodlines with special abilities. All actions would be justifiable within the bounds of realistic technology. This premise established that *Planetfall* was ultimately humanist. It was about human struggles in a human context, which is in contrast to some science fiction and post-apocalyptic games that take the concept of traditional larp races and convert them over into rethemed but similar groups for their games: as mutated bloodlines or alien races. Regarding this feature, one of our players, Theresa G., wrote:

I had only played Fantasy and Post-Apocalyptic larps before Planetfall. *As a Sci-fi-lover I definitely liked the idea of a "hard sci-fi" setting, especially without any "magic" or other special super-human skills . . . I liked that it was speculative without rewriting the meaning of being Human. The players in* Planetfall *are the result of human actions and humans alone. We're not mutated by a virus; we're not special races like Elves and Dwarves. We have no special skills other than human fragility, resilience, tenacity and folly.*

Another player, Michelle E., commented:

Planetfall *is all about ideologies and worldviews. Most games, if not all, actually are, but they frame it within the context of "races." Hence, there are races that are inherently evil with the one guy (usually with two swords and a panther) who somehow isn't evil. Of course, there are many characters who were born into the culture of their ideology, but also many who switched over the course of their lives and they are not "marked" with their past. I liked that, a game without character races, but instead a selection of how they think.*

We did make one exception to this rule. To accommodate players who could not participate in violent or threatening situations, we create a class of colonist known as Synthetics. They are artificial biological androids, who were constructed as professionals and experts for the colony. Programmed to be completely violence averse, they allow our non-combat players to have an in-game and non-breaking reason for their aversion to violent conflict.

The synthetic person is a well-established feature of even hard science fiction. Providing a conceit to let our non-combat players have diegetic reasons for their status was a strong enough argument for this small exception.

Asking Tough Questions

> *I don't know how you perceive my mission as a writer, but for me it is not a responsibility to reaffirm your concretized myths and provincial prejudices. It is not my job to lull you with a false sense of the rightness of the universe.*
>
> *—Harlan Ellison*[11]

Science fiction is often at its best when it asks pertinent and topical questions about where we are as a species, where we are going, and who we are. Most books that have transcended the science fiction "ghetto" to become respected literature are defined by this trait, e.g. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

To that end, *Planetfall*'s points of contention rotate around real world issues or in questioning deeply held real world beliefs. According to player Nathaniel E., "Important topics are all over the backstory," and Rachel C. stated, "This is a medium and a forum for people to discuss what's happening in our times by extrapolating the consequences of our actions out over time. The combination of politics, science, corporations, and what happens when we discover how to almost read people's minds using algorithms and advanced surveillance is just... wow... it's not hard to believe the setting is completely real and possible given our current situation and it's a perfect balance of scary and wonderful at the same time."

The philosophies and factions challenge ideals about freedom and self-expression. These issues came regularly up in game and players have expressed that they are surprised at how much they sympathize with the authoritarian regime of Earth. "This may sound terrifying, but I actually agree with the UEA far more than my character does," said one player who wished for that comment to remain anonymous.

Issues surrounding conservation and environmentalism are also brought up in the game. Player Morgan N. described the survival mode of the game bleeding into her day after game as, "When you need to bathe to get the dirt off of you but you don't want to waste water rations," in a Facebook post. There are questions about the ethics of eating the local wildlife and disturbing the local ecosystem. Proposals to set fire to a local biome to eliminate an aggressive species of wildlife were met by strong objections on environmental grounds, reinforced by the knowledge that the staff would enforce "realistic" consequences due to the hard science fiction atmosphere. Another player commented during game that it was impossible justify remaining vegetarian in-character when "500 pounds of meat just goes walking by and people are starving," noting that this is probably why few hunter-gatherer peoples do not eat meat.

Other taboos, such as cannibalism, have been explored during the game. Faced with a high-tech, but low-resource situation, characters actively discussed cannibalizing a colonist who was executed for dereliction of duty. The arguments were various, but ultimately were put to rest by the prospect of health risks of kuru, a disease that affects cannibals.

This question and the execution itself also led to a discussion after game among the community regarding bleed [12] and intensity. The staff advised the players on how to handle decompression and reminded them of the psychological safety rules in place; several members of the player base was excited by the scene, but acknowledged that it had a lasting effect on them days later.

Technology and Rules

A favorite quip among our group is "the future is made of glowing rectangles," referring to science fiction film and television's love affair with myriads of glowing displays in its designs. The future of *Planetfall* is definitely full of glowing rectangles, as the use of mobile technology is the centerpiece of the game.

The Planetfall Mobile App

The cornerstone of the *Planetfall* game is the mobile app and the game server with which it communicates. The app currently runs on Android only due to licensing restrictions and ease of access; we require all players to have access to an Android phone or tablet.

The app forms the backbone of interaction with the game world through QR codes created by the staff around the site or interaction with other players. Some of the QR codes correspond with game objects that have special information or actions assigned to them that are only available to characters with certain skills or traits. This method allowed us to display a large amount of information to the proper players and store it in the app for their later consultation, helping us insert in-depth information into the game easily.

11. Harlan Ellison, *Shatterday* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), II.

12. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Bleed: The Spillover Between Player and Character," Nordiclarp.org, March 2, 2015, http://nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/.

The development of the mobile app and associated server are not easy endeavors, comprising many hours of work by talented people. This issue is possibly the greatest impediment to developing apps for specific larps: the sheer amount of time and technical knowledge required.

Character Creation

There is no pen and paper character creation in *Planetfall*. Characters are created and submitted using our web application. It is a guided process handled completely by the computer.

Inspired by the "lifepath" character creation of the tabletop *Traveller* RPG, the player creates a biography of their character by making choices as to where their character started in life and where they went. A character may start out as a child of a political family, go into a military academy, and choose their experiences from there to gain military skills; or grow up on Mars, learn to become a biologist and engineer; or a myriad of other branching stories.

These choices define what sets of skills the player can choose from and what next life choices they can make. A character from a more privileged background may have some common choices with a less privileged one, but only the former can select a path into the highest levels of the bureaucracy or academia, while the latter can select a path into the criminal underworld and gray markets with their associated skills.

Since character creation is handled by the computer, the designers do not have to show all paths and options to the player, allowing choices to be obscured and encouraging a more narrative development of a character. This can be frustrating to players seeking to min-max or have a particular skill set, but it enforces diversity and makes it more difficult to have unlikely or strange combinations of skills since they are directly tied to your background. Player Michelle E. commented, "There is a bit of a problem, where players are finding it difficult to get to the skills and life paths they think they want when they approach character creation. But I quite liked the ability to create my character almost as a stream of consciousness without the distractions of 'how do I min-max this?'"

It also makes it difficult to create a character that does not fit into the world, which ties in with the background literacy we mentioned earlier. Each step of the life path is coupled with short explanations, such as describing surviving in the underbelly of Earth's cities or in the privileged halls of arcologies. This process provided tangential learning for the player to learn more about the fictional universe of *Planetfall*.

Hidden complexity is a fantastic ability granted to us by our use of software. Character creation relies on a vast and complex skill tree. There are various prerequisites and levels of competency for each skill, with certain skills and levels opening up access to other skills. The skill tree contains over two hundred different skills, but since skill choices are filtered by a character's life choices during creation, the player only has to worry about a fraction of them.

Some players have found the system to be very enjoyable, as it takes almost no time to create a character. Player Rachel C. said, "It gives you the tools you need to build a character and it creates a person—not just some stats and abilities." Others do not like that the options are obscured; David Q. said, "I personally spent somewhere in the area of 3—4 hours of clicking through options and refreshing the website in order to restart in order to see what all possible options would fit the character I was trying to make while trying to unlock possible skills."

Death to Index Cards

While *Planetfall* uses a skill and item based system, it has no physical character sheets or item cards. Using skills and trading items are handled fully through the app, although players are encouraged to use representative props. One of the big advantages for the game staff is that nothing exists in the *Planetfall* game without us knowing about it, as it is stored in the game server. It is easy for us to look up how many people have certain skills or how much of any resource is in play.

The app allows us to have very dynamic stat systems, more akin to video games or tabletop. All characters have vital statistics such as hydration, hunger, as well as mental statistics like focus or morale. These stats can have effects on the rules without the player having to remember or account for them.

We can simulate the various needs for survival, weigh them, and use complex mechanics for how much they affect the character's effectiveness and well-being without the player having to know how it is all done. They simply know that they are getting dehydrated and their productivity is going down, which is all they need to know. As Theresa G. said:

> *I don't have to rely on calls, or clumsy interpersonal mechanics to register the changes I enact on the game environment and other players. As a replacement character sheet, it's very useful not having to mark down skills used or interactions between players. As a biometrics counter it spurs everyone in how to steer how they present themselves and the way their character "feels." The inventory means I spend far less time sorting "loot" or other items, guarding from other players, or trips to logistics to get things I spent time "making." That cuts down on the out of character time needed, which means more time playing, leading to better immersion.*

Analyzing, Acting, and Crafting

Since our mobile app knows all that you can do and all that you have, complex rules for interaction can be written that are invisible to the player. A single piece of wildlife or mineral deposit can have several different pieces of information attached to it, which allows for different actions to be taken if the right player interacts with the object in question.

For example, a native berry scans as just that to most colonists, but those with the Biology skill are given more information and with the Botany skill, even more. They are also given an option to do an analysis if they have the appropriate lab equipment in their inventory, spending time to determine whether the berry has any interesting properties. Someone with the Distillery skill and enough of the berries can interact with the code through a distillery prop in game and start making alcohol.

Most actions in *Planetfall* are selected by the player by scanning a code attached to an in-game prop—like the distillery prop, in the above example—or selecting the appropriate skill or item for the action in the app. A botanist scans a flower, and is given the option analyze it, or a player opens his hunting skill and selects the Hunt action. Actions take a set amount of time, modified by the character's vital statistics, since well-fed hydrated people tend to work better and faster. Actions can change their own or other character's statistics, as well as produce and consume items. They will require certain skills, items or combinations, and some items or skills make the action more productive.

A typical action is hunting. It requires the skill Survival, a gun and bullets for that gun. It consumes a certain number of bullets, and produces a random number of animal carcasses within a range. However, a character with levels in the Firearms skill consumes less bullets the more skilled she is with a gun; a character with levels of the Hunting skill produces more carcasses, and a more accurate long-range gun can also improve the action. However, for all this complexity and rules, this process is invisible to the player; we can easily enforce that skilled marksmen trained in hunting are the best and most efficient hunters, because the app automatically takes into account all of these things.

Also, resource chains and economic systems can operate with a minimum of staff intervention. The above animal carcasses have associated actions for skinning, producing raw meat, animal pelts and bones. These other items can allow people with the appropriate skills and materials to cook or cure the meat, tan the pelts, and process the bones.

Giving the characters mental stats that can decrease and need to be refreshed gave us the opportunity to incorporate skills such as Psychology or Leadership into the economics of the game. Socially focused characters can boost their compatriots by providing counseling sessions or inspiring them, making leaders and counselors a key part of people's lives.

The app-driven mechanics of the game combine both a video game-like "grinding" component, while also contributing to the immersion of the game. The app an excellent case of simulation-style rules being a vehicle for role-play and immersion instead of an impediment.

Meanwhile, in the Real World...

Not everything can be handled by the computer. Combat is handled in our game using foam dart guns, e.g. NERF. While augmented reality combat systems such as laser tag have come a long way, the cost and technical limitations led us to opt for a foam dart system.

Our combat system is quick. Being struck by a round anywhere causes a character to go down and start to bleed out. A "medical emergency" button is provided by the app, which starts the countdown, providing a code that a character with the ability to treat wounds can scan in order to get information about the wounded character that might affect the level of injury, such as how much armor the character was wearing. The treatment time and rest time for each wound is determined by chance, with the odds weighted by the injured character's armor and stats combined with the treating character's skill and equipment. Every injury has a small chance to be fatal and the game has no resurrection mechanic. Therefore, all violence carries the small risk of death, tinging it with danger; if a character does not receive any treatment, they have the worst odds.

Top: Members of the Neoprimitive faction gathering resources.

Bottom: Engineers simulate working at the forge.
PHOTO BY SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN.

The use of the app allows this math to be invisible and for timers for treatment to be handled to the side while players role-play appropriately. Like with other systems, the ability to change small increments behind the scene allows for a nuanced system that awards specialization without having a burdensome interruption of the flow of the game.

Other Techniques

In addition to the rules and technology, we used other techniques for furthering immersion and roleplay.

WYSIWIG

Planetfall operates by a What You See Is What You Get (WYSIWYG) mentality. Players are expected to roleplay all actions, even as the mechanics are being handled by the app. During action countdowns, instructions and suggestions are displayed. Players are expected to have proper representations of all inventory items.

The game's action mechanics enforce WYSIWIG. As the player's app counts down, players are instructed by their devices to play out mining, forging steel or whatever task they are completing.[13] In the case of social skills, characters must engage in a counseling session or a leadership session. This requirement, and the rewards for these actions, makes the colony come alive with activities without much staff intervention.

Incorporating WYSIWIG ideas with the app has been a learning experience. With the use of timers and the removal of mechanics from the hands of the player, consulting rulebooks is no longer an issue. Players are freed up to roleplay, act out, and converse during actions. However, various usability issues arose. The concept works, but prompts like sounds to indicate when a timer is completed, as well as interface changes, were required as the game's development progressed.

Freeform Nights

Game weekends of *Planetfall* sometimes are preceded by a freeform night moderated by player Sarah Lynne Bowman, framed as a collective dream experience experienced while in cryogenic stasis aboard the colony ship during its voyage to the stars. This activity is transparent, where players learn more about each other's characters and the game world.

The players are broken off into groups of less than a dozen. A choice of situations (e.g. "a difficult decision has to be made") and emotions (e.g. "regret") are drawn from two decks of cards, and the player formulates a memory or dream that their character experiences during cryo. Other players act out roles within the dream. Techniques are drawn from both the American freeform and Nordic tradition, such as monologue, bird-in-ear and Last Line. We also use this time to teach our psychological safety techniques also borrowed from those traditions: "red, yellow and green" and signaling techniques.

13. Editor's note: "Forging steel," in this case, is more representational role-play than actual, e.g. banging on a piece of metal or plastic with a tool to represent the process.

The freeform sessions have been critical in building our gaming community, as well as introducing new players to their characters and group; Rachel C. commented, "This is such a great way to break up cliques and give people a wider community in the game."

It has also helped familiarize players with our game world, as the game staff is on hand to answer questions and make clarifications, while veteran players also can assist with their own learned knowledge of the game.

Education as a Game Effect

One of the more exciting developments we noticed from *Planetfall* was an uptick of interest and discussion of real world science and engineering as an effect of playing our game. Active player-generated topics on our social media groups and forums have included the Linnaean system of biological taxonomy and the details of antiretroviral drugs. We also have had discussions on sustainable energy and how to build an actual wind power generator for our game site. Links to popular science as well as scientific journals are regularly shared by both the staff and players, spurred by the mutual interest of players attracted to science fiction.

This development was not completely unexpected. Science fiction fandom groups, such as Trekkies, have long been associated with careers in STEM fields, with many citing science fiction as an inspiration for choosing their careers or for taking on real world engineering challenges.

STEM Education through Game Challenges

However, the game itself could be considered an educational experience. The game staff's commitment to hard science fiction forces us to research topics and consult with people trained in the appropriate field—some of them being our own players. Challenges in the game range from civil engineering issues like water purification and power generation, to medical and life sciences issues with local wildlife and disease; we strive to portray these issues accurately. The game staff members are not themselves experts, but rather autodidacts. Mistakes have been made, but corrected, often due to player feedback and research.

Future technology does exist to help solve these problems—bioengineered algae to produce fuel and purify water, for instance—but these are extrapolations from real world breakthroughs that the staff researches. While we cannot predict the future, we can at least give players a sense of where the road leads.

This commitment to using real science and engineering has led to players doing their own research into issues. They frequently bring up posited or experimental technology, asking if it could be included in the game world. In-game challenges often lead to out-of-game research and discussion of real science—such as a viral infection sweeping through the colony leading to real world research into how antiviral drugs are manufactured or how wind turbines are built. "Once it catches your imagination, you end up looking up real world mechanics and seeing just what all is possible," said player Tommie R.

Engineers and Scientists as Central Characters

Planetfall is not a combat-heavy game. While violence exists, and the abrupt nature of our combat system makes it swift and deadly, the game does not focus on traditional "mods." Aggressive animals exist on the fictional planet of Medina, but they are not the primary challenge of the game. The central issue is rebuilding civilization on an alien world and facing the challenges of learning to live in a new place.

Scientists and engineers in our system are specialized characters, branching from a core skill set to specialize in diverse topics like genetics, civil engineering, or metallurgy. Combined with the crafting system, these experts often play a central role in driving the colony's survival, as opposed to being support characters to combat classes.

This focus has both attracted players interested in STEM subjects and lead players to educate themselves. "I had to do research to play my character," said Michael B. "I'm not an electrical engineer in real life, but I had to be able to talk about electronics and electricity like I knew it very well. This required me to do a lot of research in a lot of topics that I wouldn't have learned about otherwise, and I'm glad I did."

Cultural Diversity and Linguistics

Planetfall tries to portray a future world that could naturally develop from the current one. In the design, I tended to carry forward things from our real world rather than invent things from out of nothing.

One tenet was that the *Planetfall* setting should be one that shows the diversity of regions and cultures from where they might derive. The name of the colony ship, Sikandar, derives from Persian, while the names of the star system's planets come from Islamic history and Arabian mythology. The city of Singapore plays a prominent role in the setting and its particular form of hybrid English—Singlish—informs a great deal of the in-character slang. Meanwhile, the Martian colony was described as a joint European and American project. With this note and others, the world has woven in hints

that the *Planetfall* universe is a product of a diverse world. This design choice was to avoid the unfortunate tendency of some science fiction to be populated with characters who all sound and look like they are from Small Town America.

Some of our players took these nods and ran with them. As mentioned above, Michael Bushee, a sociology student, researched Singaporean English and its various loan words, and made a video explaining how Singlish would work. Bushee also derived his own Martian dialect based on loanwords from German and French mixed with American and British English. Additionally, he produced faux academic papers studying his own faction, the Neoprimitives.

Others have found that the crafting and production systems in *Planetfall* have given them a new insight into the fundamental forces behind economics. Bushee said, "Scarcity as the driver of economics is definitely on my radar in a big way now in a way that wasn't before, as well as larger-scale environmental change and its effects on society."

Conclusion

The use of mobile technology is definitely part of our future as a hobby. As augmented reality technologies struggle to be realized, they have already taken on larp-like elements. The crossover is inevitable. *Planetfall* was engineered to fit app-centric gameplay, so I do not think it is in every game's future. However, as the technology becomes more approachable, it is definitely part of our hobby going forward. It allows for previously burdensome or intrusive mechanics to be integrated into our gaming experience more easily.

Furthermore, on the topic of the future, one of notable things about science fiction authors is that if you listen to them talk about their genre, they are advocates for the inherent value of their themes in a way that few other genre authors are. It is not their own works, but science fiction itself, that is a good thing. I have to agree. Science fiction is both about our future and our present. It asks us where we are going. It asks us to dream up both problems and solutions, to face where we are heading as a species. I am glad to see my small contribution to the genre seems to have had the same effect.

As a long time fan of science fiction, it has been exciting for me to not only pioneer new technologies into the medium that I love, but to see it give birth to a solid science fiction experience in the tradition of my favorite authors—one that seemed to benefit our players.

Science fiction is the literature of ideas. Larping science fiction allows for a unique way to experience those ideas and explore the messages of the storied genre—both messages of impending disaster and hope.

> *I think that science fiction, even the corniest of it, even the most outlandish of it, no matter how badly it's written, has a distinct therapeutic value because all of it has as its primary postulate that the world does change. I cannot overemphasize the importance of that idea.—Robert Heinlein*

Matthew Webb *is the creator of Planetfall and owner of its production company, Incognita Limited. He began larping when he was 17 years old with Call of Cthulhu Live. He is a professional software engineer, working with the Department of Defense developing applications to support military training exercises and education. He frequently applies some of his knowledge from live action role-playing and gaming to his professional field. A native of Austin, he lives there with his wonderful domestic partner Stephanie, her daughter Belinda, and two black cats.*

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"Actual Play" and the Forge Tradition

William J. White

Game studies scholar Jesper Juul has noted that the art of studying games is one that has been "repeatedly lost" over the years.[1] Of course, to put it this way is somewhat like asserting that Columbus discovered America: it aligns one with a tendentious perspective on who exactly was out of touch. But Juul's observation underscores, as he intends, the extent to which the scholarship of games is allowed to be ignorant not of its own history *per se*, but of the work of those laboring in other (often earlier) disciplinary traditions or in different scholarly communities—work that, despite its source, nonetheless possibly offers useful methods, interesting perspectives, and instructive problems for efforts in the home field. For example, a relatively popular introductory video game studies text observes in an early chapter that the newly emergent field co-exists with an older scholarly "simulation community" that also studies games, but that "communication and collaboration between [the two fields] has so far been rare."[2]

A nascent interdisciplinary research community has even more recently begun to form on the margins of digital game studies, in the shape of a specialty that takes as its object of inquiry non-digital games, including board games, tabletop role-playing, live-action role-playing, pervasive games, cosplay, and related forms.[3] Among the numerous challenges this community faces is the task of correlating or cataloging the far-flung precincts of scholarly and quasi-scholarly—what may be thought of as design communities or "expert player" traditions—game discourse, exactly in order to avoid losing sight of prior work that may be of value, interest, or utility to the ongoing efforts of the community.

This chapter seeks to contribute to this act of intra-disciplinary surveillance by discussing the Forge,[4] a now-dormant online discussion site for the design and publication of independently produced, creator-owned tabletop RPGs—hereinafter TRPGs—that once served as a workshop for the development of an influential theory of TRPG play known as the Big Model or—albeit somewhat synecdochically—as "GNS."[5] It argues that a more significant potential contribution of the Forge to the scholarship of analog games in general and role-playing in particular—and perhaps even to the wider game studies field—than the Big Model is the Forge's phenomenological focus on "actual play" (AP) reports as the currency of TRPG discourse. In pursuit of this argument, it first discusses the position or, perhaps more accurately, perceptions of the Forge within the broader community of online TRPG discussion, followed by a brief history of the Forge that underscores its evolution and its shifting character as a communication environment over time. These elements provide the context necessary to undertake a rhetorical analysis of a single discussion thread on the Forge that can be read as an instance of the Forge's dialogical phenomenology of actual play.

Welcome to the Forge

In some corners of the gaming-related Internet, "the Forge" is a name to conjure with, being rather by way of a bugaboo. The Forge drew fire from critics for, among other things, the artistic or intellectual pretensions of its participants; the tendentiousness of the theory of role-playing game design developed and advocated at the site; and for arrogating the "indie" label to itself and its members.[6] One of its founders, Ron Edwards, the chief moderator and leading theorist of the site, became a lightning rod for Internet outrage in some gaming-related precincts—partly because of the perceived brusqueness of his style of moderating the site, but mainly for his 2006 position that a particular approach to "story" in role-playing that was popular in the 1990s *literally injured* the still-developing brains of many then-adolescent gamers who used it. The result of this supposed "injury" was that it had become much more difficult for them to grasp approaches that actually produced story as a byproduct of play, rather than via players' retroactive sense-making or through the successful execution of the game master's pre-planned plot. This position was often glossed as "Ron Edwards thinks traditional role-playing causes brain damage!" by those infuriated by what they regarded as a patronizing attack on their own play preferences.[7]

One of the Forge's fiercest critics, the proprietor of a similar set of forums called the RPG Site[8] who goes by the moniker "RPGPundit," exemplifies the resentful suspicion with which the Forge, its theories, its methods, and its proponents were viewed. Here is his reply to an Internet correspondent called Paka who urged him to post about his experiences at the Forge in a spirit of engagement rather than sniping at it. It weaves together a number of common or typical negative characterizations about the Forge: an over-reliance on obscurantist jargon, adherence to an incorrect theory of role-playing, churlish moderation, and in particular a refusal to engage with anyone who hasn't already absorbed hundreds of pages of prior online discussion.

> *The sort of thing Ron seems to want is people to say stuff like "I'm doing X in my* [Dungeons & Dragons] *game, so that's narrativism, right?" Or "Player Y did something I didn't like, that's fortune-in-the-middle, right?" But see, the assumption is that GNS is true. That's the parameter you have to work from in the Forge. So I couldn't actually post a thread of actual play saying "My experience in playing* D&D *shows me that GNS Is WRONG." I suspect that one could get away with posting something like "I played a* D&D *game last night that, like every other* D&D *game I've ever played, was actually a mix of Gamism, Narrativism, and Simulationism. Now according to your theory that should make for a miserable fucking experience, and yet this kind of gaming is consistently more satisfying to me and every other player I've met in my life than narrow pseudo-intellectual microgames that try to cram themselves into one of the narrow randomly-selected definitions you invented out of your ass." But then he'd probably just close the thread and tell me that before I can post I have to read 23 of his essays that explain how when I or others claim we're having fun playing our "dysfunctional game," we're in fact lying to ourselves and others.*[9]

1. Jesper Juul, "The Repeatedly Lost Art of Studying Games," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1, no. 1 (2001), http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-review/.

2. Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction, 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2013), Kindle edition, loc. 416.

3. See, for example, the online journals *International Journal of Role-Playing* and *Analog Game Studies* as well as the books produced by the Nordic larp scene, the forthcoming *Role-Playing Studies Handbook* (edited by Sebastian Deterding and Jose Zagal), and of course the current volume in this series and its predecessors.

4. Located at www.indie-rpgs.com; due to a server malfunction, all posts before about 2008 are located at www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/.

5. "GNS" stands for Gamism, Narrativism, and Simulationism, the Big Model's three acknowledged "Creative Agendas" (CA) that shape players' shared exploration of the game's diegetic and game-mechanical elements. The CA are derived from similar concepts in the Threefold Model developed on the Usenet newsgroup rec.games.frp.alt (RGFA) in the late 1990s, but are not conceived solely as individual play styles or preferences.

6. For example, Kyle Aaron, October 28, 2006, "The Forgers Claim Another Victim," The RPG Site, http://www.therpgsite.com/showthread.php?t=2482; Catelf, December 26, 2012, "Where Was the Forge Wrong?" *The RPG Site*, http://www.therpgsite.com/showthread.php?t=25166; Brian Gleichman, February 1, 2009, "Why RPG Theory has a Bad Rep," *Whitehall ParaIndustries: A Blog about RPG Theory and Design*, http://whitehall-paraindustries.blogspot.com/; John Tarnowski, March 3, 2007, "Once More, Defining 'Swine'," *The RPG Site*, http://www.therpgsite.com/showthread.php?t=4771.

7. Frequent Forge poster Moreno Roncucci suggests that in making this claim, Edwards was arguing from introspection, rather than exempting himself from the induced habits of mind inculcated by some "traditional" forms of TRPG play. Moreno Roncucci, May 30, 2012, "When You Point to the Moon, RPG Culture Hears Only 'Brain Damage,'" *The Forge*, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=33122. Edwards's insistence on the provocative term "brain damage" can be most charitably interpreted as a kind of biological materialism that, in having no truck with any sort of mind/brain dualism, is perfectly understandable from someone with a Ph.D. in biology.

8. The RPG Site, TheRPGSite.com, accessed November 19, 2015, www.therpgsite.com.

9. John Tarnowski, writing as RPGPundit, comment on Judd Karlman (Paka), April 30, 2006, "Open Letter to RPGPundit." *The RPG Site*, http://www.therpgsite.com/showthread.php?t=1036. It should be pointed out that Tarnowski's argument fundamentally misunderstands the Forge concepts it invokes; however, it is cited not for its authority, but rather for how it exemplifies a particular criticism of the Forge.

Thus, the announcement in 2010 that the Forge was entering a "Winter Phase" in which active discussions would be wound down over the course of a year or two and the site turned into an archive was greeted by RPGPundit as Edwards' capitulation in an ideological struggle and an admission of the irrelevance of the Forge's theories.[10]

However, this *Sturm und Drang* over RPG theory arguably obscures a real achievement of the Forge, which was the development of an understanding of RPG play that was actually rather impatient with abstract theorizing and much more focused on understanding how to diagnose the sources of a specific player's dissatisfaction with his or her own play experiences in concrete terms. Granted, this sort of close reading of "actual play"—often referred to as AP—required the sustained attention and committed participation of the people involved, sometimes to a daunting degree. The extent to which AP was the *sine qua non* of participation in the Forge is explicitly laid out in Paka's challenge to RPGPundit: "If you have a problem with GNS and its view of *D&D*, go write an AP about a successful game you had . . . Write the post in the spirit of helping a frustrated gamer who doesn't know what you know and wants to be able to play games that are as fun as yours are. Write the post in the spirit of wanting to understand your own process because understanding your own tools will allow you to access them better at the table."[11] *Actual play* is thus valorized at the Forge, used to refer to primarily verbal accounts of one's own experience of play, not as a fictional experience related to one's character, but as the non-diegetic interpersonal experience of being at the table and interacting with others in order to play the game.

10. John Tarnowski, November 2, 2010, "RPGPundit Declares Victory: TheRPGsite Will Thus Obviously Remain Open," The RPG Site, http://www.therpgsite.com/showthread.php?t=18606.

11. Karlman 2006.

The "Big Model" and Its Implications

The Forge's emphasis on actual play does in fact emerge from features of its Big Model as it developed over time, the fruit of numerous threads on the Forge and private conversations of its participants elsewhere. However, that fact may be easy to miss, since early versions of the theory were not as insistent as later iterations in stipulating that the three "Creative Agendas" of Gamism, Narrativism, and Simulationism reveal themselves in play as the *shared orientations* of a group of players rather than in the *individual aesthetic preferences* of the players. In other words, whereas the Big Model's conceptual predecessor, the RGFA Threefold Model, defined the three player goals or desires of Dramatism (wanting to tell a story), Gamism (wanting to win a contest), and Simulationism (wanting to emulate a world) as fundamental approaches to play held by individual players,[12] the Big Model emphasized how players in groups reinforced, rewarded, or at the very least, acknowledged each other's preferences as part of an interpersonal dynamic.

Game designer and theorist Emily Care Boss's gloss on the Big Model illustrates the nested hierarchy of elements contained in the Forge lexicon and can be used to illustrate the Big Model's focus on the interpersonal and collaborative rather than the purely psychological (see Figure 1).[13] It begins at the level of the *social contract,* which stems from the social fact of agreeing to play, and encompasses all those features that shape the contours of what Huizinga[14] has taught us to call the *magic circle*, but do not necessarily cross its boundary: things like where and when we play, who may join us, who brings snacks, and so forth. The notion of social contract is important because it underscores the collective nature of role-playing as an activity; it is something that we mostly do together. Most collective activities can be imagined to have such a "contract," which includes an understanding of why we are engaging in the activity.

12. John H. Kim, Nov. 16, 2005, "The Evolution of the Threefold Model." http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/evolution.html.

13. Emily Care Boss, "Key Concepts in Forge Theory," in *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon Ry/Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy, 2008), 232-247.

14. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

[Social Contract[Exploration[Creative Agenda=>[Techniques[Ephemera]]]]]

Figure 1: The "Big Model" as explained by Emily Care Boss.[15]

For role-playing, according to the Big Model, this activity is *exploration:* imagining the in-game details of a fictional world and utilizing the game-mechanical procedures that have been established to introduce and modify those details. Our shared, or at least compatible, interests in imaginative exploration shape the *creative agenda* that helps drive more specific choices we make in playing the game. Creative agenda operates at the group level to structure play; in particular, it is manifest in the "reward cycle" that reinforces particular at-the-table behaviors and game-mechanical moves. Creative agenda influences, but does not totally determine, the specific *techniques* or rules that we employ to establish who gets to say what when about what is happening in the fictional game-world. The specific implementation of the techniques in place for any given group of players at a given time are called the *ephemera* of play.

Creative agenda is the encompassing term for the three different approaches to play adapted by the Forge from the RGFA Threefold Model. In the Big Model, creative agendas mediate between the game-related intentions and aspirations of the players, and the specific moment-by-moment choices they make at the table. However, creative agenda is less a property of individual players—though their preferences certainly matter—than it is of the group as a whole. Despite a persistent game design-theoretical focus on "coherence"—i.e., designing games that consistently facilitate a single mode of play—at the Forge, it turns out that for *diagnosing* instances of unsatisfying game play, *which* specific creative agenda preferences are held by which players is less important than the fact that a conflict among those preferences does exist.

That said, it is worth describing briefly the GNS element of the Big Model. The three creative agendas identified by the Forge are *gamism, narrativism,* and *simulationism*. At the Forge, gamism was often referred to as "Step On Up" play, with the term implying both the carnival-barker sense of playful adversity and the testing of one's mettle and stretching of one's capabilities by addressing a challenge. The point of gamist play was thus to demonstrate one's mastery of a game and sometimes one's ability to be a good sport. *Narrativism* was the preference for "Story Now": story emergent in the moment of play—and neither before nor after—where "story" was taken to mean something like *consequential character action in the face of thematically meaningful choice.* Narrativist play thus created story as an emergent property of placing characters in thematically rich fictional situations. This must be strongly contrasted to notions of "narrativism" as having something to do with the enactment of pre-plotted, usually GM-created stories ("Story Before") or players' retroactive narrative sense-making of what happened in the game ("Story After"). Neither of those things are narrativism in Forge terms. *Simulationism*, which in the early days of the Forge was often given short theoretical shrift, was called the "Right to Dream," implying that the point of simulationist play was the imaginary occupation of some fictional or real-world setting; literary or cinematic genre; pop cultural franchise; or other secondary creation. Simulationist play was understood by the Forge as having mainly to do with *mimesis,* in Caillois's terms.[16]

15. Boss.

The Big Model differs, too, from other typologies of play style or creative preferences by bracketing off the concept of immersion, with Forge participants regarding it as term too imprecise to be useful in discussing play. Arguments over the nature and definition of immersion were seen as reflecting the highly idiosyncratic character of the term, with different individuals understanding and perhaps achieving immersion in different ways so that a broad enough definition turned out to be merely a label for the kind of role-playing one liked. Arguably, the concept of creative agenda *replaces* immersion as an explanation for players' enjoyment of the game, providing a kind of communal or group-based immersion that is visible in the reward cycles of play.[17]

An important implication of the Big Model is that the data that give access to creative agenda and higher levels of the taxonomic model in any given instance actually proceed from the level of ephemera—the very specific procedures of play used at the gaming table—as well as from individual players' phenomenological perceptions of the play experience over the course of a period of play long enough to encompass the various reward cycles that might be in operation during the game. In other words, the focus on *actual play* that we have seen to be a major component of discussion at the Forge emerges directly from the theoretical commitments engendered by the Big Model.

16. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*. Trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

17. William J. White, J. Tuomas Harviainen, and Emily Care Boss, "Role-Playing Communities, Cultures of Play, and the Discourse of Immersion," in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White, 71-86 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013).

The Seasons of the Forge: A History

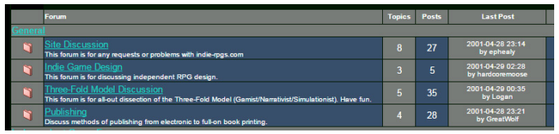
The Forge remained the site of more or less active discussion on tabletop role-playing game play, design, and publication for about twelve years, with the earliest archived threads dating to April 2001 and the last post dated June 1, 2012.[18] "Ed Healy and I founded a site called Hephaestus' Forge in 1999," Edwards recalls. "Clinton Nixon and I re-launched it as a forum in 2000[19] as The Forge, with him as primarily the manager and site organizer, and me primarily as content moderator."[20] Edwards often used the progress of the seasons as a metaphor to describe the progress of the Forge's lifecycle, a process of growth, maturation, decline, and obsolescence. This chapter follows the seasonal sequence, but slightly adjusts the dates proposed by Edwards for the periodization of the Forge's history based on an examination of the distribution of threads over time.

This history is important for the overall argument of this chapter because, in showing the changing foci of attention and structures of conversation, it illustrates the move away from RPG Theory as a central focus of the Forge and toward conversations centered on actual play; that is to say, grounded in the discursive exploration of the TRPG player's experience.

The Prehistory of the Forge

What has sometimes been called "Forge theory"[21] emerged from earlier discussions at a now-defunct site called the Gaming Outpost and on the UseNet group called RGFA or rec.games.frp.advocacy in the late 1990s.[22] However, it should be noted that out of the two essays that Boss indicates as seminal influences on the Forge that were originally hosted at the Gaming Outpost before its demise, only one has what may be considered "theory" as its focus, arguing against the then-conventional wisdom that RPG rules systems were not important in producing a particular experience of play; in contrast, Edwards sought to demonstrate, in what became a central tenet of the Forge, that "System Does Matter." The other essay advocated for independent publishing models enabled by the arrival of print-on-demand and Internet-based marketing.[23] This division reflects an originary bifurcation in the purpose of the Forge, with some discussions focused on the pragmatic aspects of "indie" game design, publication, marketing, and distribution, while others were invested in developing an understanding of TRPG systems and their functions.

The *fin de siècle* context of the Forge's origins are important in understanding its relationship to the rest of the TRPG hobby, whose leading edge in the 1990s had moved away from the "you can try anything" ethos of early *D&D*[24] to a "storytelling" model in which the publisher's "metaplot"—i.e., a grand narrative revealed through published supplements that served as the occasionally intrusive backdrop of local play—or the GM's "plot"—i.e., a structure of pre-planned in-game events narrated by the game master and written either by her or by the designer of pre-written "adventure modules," were understood to be a key element of play.[25] The effect of this shift was to reveal a tension between the authority of the GM as arbiter of rules and game-world and the agency of players as protagonists in the game-fiction. In Forge parlance, this tension between "the GM controls the game-world" and "the player controls the character" is referred to as "the Impossible Thing Before Breakfast"; that is, something which is believed even though it is not in fact the case. This tension over narrative control has been noted as the cause of conflicts within play groups, as when GMs "railroad" or otherwise constrain the player-characters (PCs), or the PCs run roughshod over the plot devices presented by the GM.[26]



	Forum	Topics	Posts	Last Post
General				
	Site Discussion This forum is for any requests or problems with indie-rpgs.com	8	27	2001-04-28 23:14 by ephealy
	Indie Game Design This forum is for discussing independent RPG design.	3	5	2001-04-29 02:28 by hardcoremoose
	Three-Fold Model Discussion This forum is for all-out dissection of the Three-Fold Model (Gamist/Narrativist/Simulationist). Have fun.	5	35	2001-04-29 00:35 by Logan
	Publishing Discuss methods of publishing from electronic to full-on book printing.	4	28	2001-04-28 23:21 by GreatWolf

Figure 2: The original four general forums on the Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com), via the Internet Archive "Wayback Machine," April 29, 2001.

Spring (2001-2004)

The Forge was intended as a place for discussing how to create and publish independent tabletop role-playing games, where "independent" meant creator-owned and self-published. However, many of the conversations at the Forge in its earliest days were oriented toward the development of a theoretical language for describing TRPG gameplay based on the GNS model Edwards had initially developed at the Gaming Outpost. The earliest Internet Archive Wayback Machine snapshot[27] of the Forge is dated April 29, 2001, and shows a total of 159 messages by 23 registered users. It included four "general forums" (see Figure 2) as well as six publisher-specific forums for discussing particular games. The structure of the forums at any given time would come to serve as a mirror for how Edwards and his partners in administering the Forge thought about the site's purpose, goals, and methods.

At the outset, the Three-Fold Model Discussion forum was the most active in terms of the number of posts, i.e. individual messages, it contained. Much attention was devoted to elaborating the Threefold Model, which became known as GNS—after its component elements Gamism, Narrativism, and Simulationism, discussed above—and then, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as the "Big Model," to reflect the adoption of a broader theoretical scope within which GNS was incorporated.

John Kim's evolutionary cladogram (see Figure 3) reinforces the notion that the bulk of the Forge's Spring period—mid- to late 2001 to the beginning of 2004, approximately—was a fruitful era of theory development, when "middle GNS" elaborated on the "early GNS" that was the product of pre-Forge theorizing at the Gaming Outpost and, later, the mailing list for Edwards' game *Sorcerer*. Kim notes that other tripartite models, also derived from the RGFA approach, were developed in parallel with GNS, some of them intended to correct what were viewed as errors or at least unsatisfactory aspects in GNS, and some of which developed concepts that were later in one form or another incorporated into the Big Model. Others, such as the "Three-Way Model" developed by Scandinavian larpers, emerged independently and continued after the end of active development of RGFA Threefold.[28]

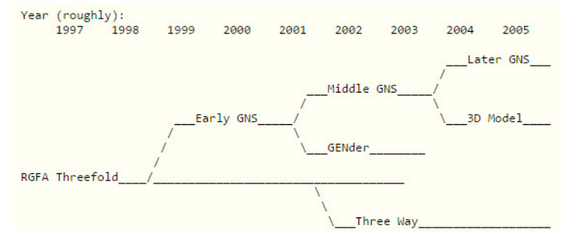


Figure 3: The evolution of the Three-fold Model (Kim 2005).

Meanwhile, the period of "2002-2004 was a time of massive attraction to the Forge, and so much of that was fantastic and fruitful and exciting."[29] By the end of 2004, there were eight general forums comprising 7,977 threads encompassing 94,733 individual posts—an expansion of almost 400% in thread volume since April 2001. The most active was the RPG Theory forum, with 28,322 posts in 1,639 threads, a thread density of 17.3 posts per thread. The next most active was the Indie Game Design thread, with 23,318 total posts and a thread density of 11.0; it is possible that the shorter average length of game design discussions indicates that they are more quickly or easily resolved—i.e., brought to a satisfactory and definite conclusion—than are theoretical discussions. Interestingly, the other theory forum ("GNS Model Discussion") has a thread density of 16.4, similar to the RPG Theory forum, while the other practical forum ("Actual Play") has a thread density of 9.98, similar to the Indie Game

18. Ron Edwards, June 1, 2012, "And Done," *The Forge*, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=33128.

19. He means 2001, when the site's forums became active; see the discussion below.

20. Ron Edwards, December 7, 2010, "Welcome to the Site Discussion Forum and to the Forge." The Forge, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=30749.

21. Boss 2008; Edwards asserts that he has never used term "Forge theory" in his own writing (pers. comm.).

22. John H. Kim, August 1, 2003, "The Origin of the Threefold Model," http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/origin.html.

23. Emily Care Boss, October 2, 2014, "Theory Roundup," *Black and Green Games*, http://www.blackgreengames.com/lcn/2014/10/2/theory-roundup. Boss is referring to Ron Edwards, 1998, "The Nuked Apple Cart," *The Forge*, http://indie-rpgs.com/articles/12/ and Ron Edwards, 1999, "System Does Matter," *The Forge*, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/system_does_matter.html, respectively.

24. This is the thrust of Peterson's history of D&D and its roots in fantasy, war games, and simulation; Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego, CA: Unreason Press, 2012).

25. For the importance of metaplot to 1990s gaming, see Shannon Appelcline, *Designers and Dragons, vol. 3: The '90s* (Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat, Inc., 2014), Kindle edition, particularly the discussion of the publisher White Wolf. Similarly, a notion of GM-driven plot is central in Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), particularly chapters 4 ("The Reconciliation of Narrative and Game") and 7 ("Levels of Authorship"). Will Hindmarch, "Storytelling Games as Creative Medium," in *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, 47-55 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) also discusses the tension between GM plot and player-character (PC) proactivity in the context of White Wolf's Vampire: The Masquerade TRPG.

26. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013), http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue4/IJRPissue4bowman.pdf.

27. Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20010429065721/http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forum/.

28. Kim 2005.

29. Edwards 2007.

Design forum.[30] In any event, the "Middle GNS" or "Spring Phase" discussions culminated in the production of a "Provisional Glossary"[31] as well as other essays that summarized Edwards' understanding of the Big Model that the Forge had produced. However, Edwards notes, the expansion of the Forge "also brought new problems," mostly related to the social and discursive dynamics at the site.

> *We'd exerted a good enough social scene [by the end of 2004] to avoid the typical internet bullshit, but had inadvertently managed to permit a particular mutant strain to emerge. Under cover of discourse, bullshit artistry became a way to interact and play status games without actually entering into the real honest work of thinking, playing, designing, and communicating ... I came to realize that the Forge had no "OK, you're done, go and work with it" mechanism, and similar (and worse), it had no way to establish to people that they were not improving their understanding ... In the absence of such a thing, evil flowers bloomed.*[32]

These "evil flowers" included status games related to being able to claim that one was a published game designer, or to staking out turf based on opposition to or disagreement with Ron Edwards or in defiance of perceived Forge pieties or conventions; the interaction between Paka and RPGPundit described above serves as an example of the latter.

Summer (2005-2006): The Forge Diaspora and the End of Theory

Thus, by early 2005, frequent user Valamir could look back ruefully to an earlier and better period at the Forge, saying,

> *There was a time . . . or maybe it's just this old codger's nostalgic memory . . . when the theory being discussed on the Forge was rooted in actual play. Actual play is the empirical evidence upon which any theory (if it is to be useful, practical, and understandable) must be rooted. Recently there has been too much . . . FAR FAR too much . . . esoteric musings and ruminations going on. Theory for Theory's sake is not what this site's about. This is not a site for doctoral dissertations on the roleplaying equivalent of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The ONLY answer to questions like that (that this site should be concerned with) is "unless you're basing your notions in the experience of actual play . . . who cares!"*[33]

To these complaints, Edwards expressed agreement. However, he explained, "I can't dictate what people want to post about. I can only moderate them to stay on-topic per forum, to stay on-topic per thread, and to abide by the rules of courtesy." He went on to say that he was "frankly disgusted" with the GNS Discussion forum, which seemed to him to have deviated from the "very practical and play-based review of the [Provisional] Glossary"[34] that he had hoped would emerge. The RPG Theory forum was similarly problematic, suffering from "a lack of purpose" that was difficult to remedy without being unduly prescriptive.[35]

Attempts to address the problem of discussion quality took two forms. First, people who felt the Forge was not addressing their interests were encouraged to leave and start their own blogs, discussion forums, or other communities.[36] The resulting exodus, which became known as the "Forge Diaspora"[37] was given further impetus by the announcement that someday, the Forge would close—that it was "intended to be a finite project, and someday, the Big Bang would be over and all that would remain [would be] the glowing stars."[38] According to Edwards, "that worked pretty well, actually," producing "an instant drop-off of certain members' activity on the basis of, 'Well, if it's going to be over, then I don't want to be there.'"[39] However, "the most difficult participants—the ones who could transform a whole thread into mucky hell with a single post—the ones who were the least helpful, welcoming, and critical . . . were still staying. They liked it here."[40] Furthermore, Edwards went on, "they'd also managed to render the two great forums, RPG Theory and GNS, into everything the Forge's critics had always accused us of [being]: over-precious, abstract in the negative sense, exclusive, snobbish, incapable of reaching conclusions."[41] Edwards was moved to give veteran Forge posters a dressing down, telling them that "the three most important forums are Actual Play, Indie Design, and Publishing" and that if they were not replying to other people's threads in those forums, they were "a big drag" on the site, forcing others to carry their presence.[42] The robustness of the Forge Diaspora, Edwards argued, depended on those forums serving as a "social and educational pump" for the larger indie design community.[43]

Thus, the second move in the effort to manage the Forge was the closing of the Forge's two theoretical discussion forums at the end of 2005, on the premise that the Big Model was fundamentally complete. "I still wanted to keep it open for real critique," Edwards said, "but that's not what it was getting." Instead, a "core of about ten people" were using the theory forums to pursue a "sophomoric agenda" in which "they were high-flyers in Social RPG Thought 201 and they wanted to stay there for the rest of their lives," defeating the entire purpose of enabling new people to work through their own theoretical understandings and apply them to their own game play and design.[44] Theoretical discussions could still take place, but they would be anchored to practice-centered conversations about actual play.[45]

Elsewhere on the RPG-related Internet, the Forge diaspora and attendant forum closings were perceived as problematic moves, negatively affecting the quality of the conversations. The RPG Site poster Kyle Aaron reported that he had "petitioned Uncle Ronny to reopen his theory subforum" because "when he shut the sewer lid there, he didn't stop the flow of shit he'd started, he just shucked it off to new channels, it overflowed into rpg.net and elsewhere."[46] In the same thread, a poster called J. Arcane told a story in similar terms:

> *It's funny, but I didn't used to have any beef with the Forge or the theory wonks. I wasn't a fan of theory, I thought the whole pursuit was a bit silly, but I appreciated the attempts to more cerebrally examine the games. I had more beef at the time with a lot of the threadcrappers who seemed to show up at the drop of a hat and scream about "IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE FUN" and ramble a bunch of anti-intellectual garbage. And then Ron closed the theory forum. And all hell broke loose. Suddenly it was freaking all over RPGnet. It basically consumed the entire Open forum. That was when I started losing patience. And then the more I read of it, the more I realized just how utter shite it all was. This wasn't an attempt to improve games by examining how they work, it was all by and large just a lot of pseudo-intellectual bullshit posturing.*[47]

RPGPundit, for his part, saw the closing of the theory forums as another example of Edwardian high-handedness. "I strongly question Ron Edwards' motives for closing those fora," he said. "From his statements when he closed those fora, it struck me . . . as him saying 'My GNS theory is now perfect and requires no more discussion; therefore, you will no longer be allowed to question it in these forums; they will from now on automatically be the presumptions that we work from in all theory work.'"[48] From Edwards' perspective, of course, this was patently untrue: "GNS stuff can be addressed here with no hassles at all. . . . Anything else about the Big Model is similarly up for grabs, refinement, and challenge," even in the absence of forums specifically devoted to theory.[49]

Autumn (2007-2010): Damage Control

At the beginning of 2007, the site listed 11 forums as "General Forge Forums," but this included the two inactive theory forums. Among the nine active general forums, three new forums had been introduced the previous year. These included "First Thoughts" (for tentative initial forays into game design), "Playtesting" (for discussing efforts to convert game ideas into actual play), and "Endeavor" (for organized design activities including contests and challenges).[50] The First Thoughts

30. Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20041214090800/http://www.indie-rpgs.com/.

31. Ron Edwards, April 8, 2004. "The Provisional Glossary," *The Forge*, http://indie-rpgs.com/_articles/glossary.html.

32. Ron Edwards, November 24, 2007, "Interview with Vincent and Me," *The Forge*, http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=25257.

33. Ralph Mazza (as Valamir), February 14, 2005, "The Problem with This Forum: Too Much Damn Theory," *The Forge Forums Read-Only Archives,* http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=14323.

34. Edwards 2004.

35. Edwards, comment in Mazza 2005.

36. Edwards 2007.

37. Jonathan Walton, February 3, 2005, "Diaspora: How I Learned 2 Stop Worrying & Love the Forge," *The Forge*, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=14173.0.

38. Edwards 2007.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ron Edwards, August 10, 2005, "This One's Important," *The Forge Forums Read-Only Archives*, http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=16335.0.

43. Ibid.

44. Edwards 2007.

45. Ron Edwards, December 2, 2005, "Farewell to the Forum, but not to Theory," *The Forge Forums Read-Only Archives*, http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=17827.

46. Aaron 2006.

47. J. Arcane, ibid.

48. Tarnowksi (RPGPundit), in Karlman 2006.

49. Edwards 2007.

50. Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20070205005816/http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forum/.

forum was structurally the most like the existing practical forums, with a thread density of 10.23 posts per thread. Interestingly, the Site Discussion forum had grown more curt, dropping from 9.13 to 7.93 posts per thread on average. This was similar to the two other new forums, which had 7.63 and 8.48 posts per thread for Playtesting and Endeavor respectively, perhaps reflecting their roles as places for coordinating game design-related activities instead of in-depth discussion.

Edwards explained that he and site technical manager Clinton R. Nixon, seeing the site's purpose as oriented around TRPG design, had attempted to create a structure that facilitated building the skills for design and eventual publication. "Even the effort devoted to one's derivative, halting first attempt is still laudable effort," Edwards observed. "We came up with First Thoughts because we knew a kiddie pool was going to happen anyway, and might as well be contained and have a definite 'step out of it' boundary (playtesting). We made structure out of what had become a constant recommendation on our parts, to reflect upon oneself as a practitioner as the first and most powerful step of the intellectual activities here."[51]

However, Edwards' comments about "brain damage" seem to have cost him and the Forge some measure of goodwill within the Forge Diaspora, providing those already predisposed to antagonism with fuel for their hostility. In fact, Edwards continues to deal with the fallout from his remarks almost up the moment of this writing: a social media post on Google+ by Edwards defending his comments garnered 500 comments in the space of a few days in January 2015.[52] At the time, Edwards felt obligated to clarify. His point, he said, was "that the routine human capacity for *understanding, enjoying, and creating stories* is damaged . . . by repeated 'storytelling role-playing' [of the sort associated with the White Wolf game *Vampire* in particular but including 'several dozens of titles' across 15 to 20 years]." He defended his use of the term brain damage: "If someone wants to take issue of my use of the term 'brain' when I'm talking about the 'mind', I just shrug. As I see it, the mind is the physiological outcome of a working brain . . . Brain, mind, damage. I don't distinguish."[53]

While some were willing to concede the general point, the "brain damage" language was met with skepticism and resistance in many instances. "I don't agree, here," replied Forge poster Levi Kornelsen. He ticked off the extent to which he followed Edwards' logic. "Something has often been dressed up as collaborative storytelling that is not. With that, I'm on board. The acceptance of this falsehood at face value has created habits. Still onboard. These habits aren't easily broken. Yep. Still along." However, the ultimate conclusion was too much. "These habits have done actual damage, as opposed to merely creating habits that can be surmounted? Nope. Not onboard. Simple as that."[54] At a Forge Diaspora site called Story-Games, poster DevP worried that Edwards' choice of words would encourage insensitive language elsewhere in the gaming blogosphere, and others commenting in the same thread years later found the terminology at best distracting from the "interesting observation" that "strict adherence to a style of play promoted by the publishing culture of the 90s fostered a collection of social and creative dysfunctional behaviors"[55]

Among those affected by the controversy was the Forge's technical expert Clinton Nixon, who disagreed with a Story-Games comment that Edwards was "under no obligation to not piss people off." According to Nixon:

> *Not to get too about the Forge here, but [Ron Edwards] is under an obligation to me, expressed financially through my continued hosting and maintenance of the Forge. He is under an obligation to the community that was built by him and others, as they have built him up and put him in the position he is in. Do you think anyone would be talking about his theories without a continued and vital community surrounding them talking about them outside the confines of one forum? While elections were not formalized, he is pretty much a duly elected president of a movement and community. And that position comes with responsibility and obligation, most certainly.*[56]

By the next year, Nixon began to distance himself from site maintenance duties at the Forge, posting in Site Discussion on January 9, 2007, to report having completed an upgrade to the forums and on May 7 to announce scheduled downtime to migrate the site to a larger server. However, by July 29, 2007, Edwards would inform a poster interested in specific Forge decision-making procedures to "substitute Vincent [Baker] for Clinton [Nixon]" as technical manager of the site.[57] While it is almost certainly not correct to say that disagreement over the brain damage controversy caused Nixon's departure, as he remained an active poster on the Forge until 2009, it may have contributed to Nixon, like others, feeling less invested in the site.

A major server crash on May 30, 2010 could only be recuperated by splitting the site into a "read-only archive" covering 2001 through the middle of 2010 and "live forums" beginning with January 1, 2008. This may have contributed to an impression that the Forge was limping into its "Winter phase," despite the somewhat triumphalist language Edwards used to announce the imminent transition.[58]

Winter (2011-2012): Farewell to the Forge

By early 2011, a pared-down forum structure had been implemented.[59] The number of general forums was reduced to five. The Actual Play (6694 posts in 543 threads, or 12.33 posts/thread), Independent Publishing (2143 posts in 314 threads, or 6.82 posts/thread), and Site Discussion (580 posts in 91 threads, or 6.37 posts/thread) forums were retained. The First Thoughts and Playtesting forums were replaced by a Game Development forum (559 posts in 82 threads, or 6.82 posts/thread). A specific Endeavor forum for the 2011 "Ronnies" game design event was added (171 posts in 26 threads, or 6.58 posts/thread). Additionally, a small "Guide to the Archives" forum (14 posts in 6 topics, or 2.33 posts/thread) was added as well to apprise visitors of the site's bifurcation.

The relatively low thread densities for all but the Actual Play forum may reflect the final end of the hitherto "preferred sequence" in which new posters presented game design ideas, developed them via play, and turned them into publishable games. In the absence of such a sequence, a somewhat stronger focus on actual play—given the centrality of the concept to Forge philosophy—may have been the most coherent organizing principle for participants to follow. Between January 2011 and June 2012, when Edwards (2012) announced the closure of the Forge, an additional 2655 posts were made and 148 additional threads were created (for a thread density of 13.88), which supports the characterization of the Forge as remaining focused on actual play to the bitter end.

To be sure, blogger Chris Chinn's assessment of the impending closure of the Forge noted a marked decrease in the quality of discussions over the previous few years, which he attributed to the abandonment of the site by the critical mass of posters needed to maintain its existing culture.[60] Nonetheless, Chinn identified several features of the Forge's approach of discussion that he regretted were not more prevalent elsewhere on the Internet. These included (a) goal-oriented discussions wherein original posters had an instrumental purpose for starting a thread, and that thread continued only so long as it moved toward its purpose, and (b) a focus on actual play rather than ideology combined with an expectation that people widen their range of exposure to various styles of play. "Often enough," Chinn remarked, "those two requirements set a lot of people into incoherent rage," but the effect was to create "a safe space for people to focus on analysis of play and design in a serious fashion."

AP at the Forge: A Rhetorical Approach

Having come this far, drilling down to the level of AP discussion and examining an exemplary instance offers a final piece of evidence contributing to this chapter's argument about the evolution of the Forge away from theory development and towards a theoretically informed dialogical phenomenology of actual play. The analytic approach to be employed in this examination will be *rhetorical*; that is, interested in the persuasive force of discourse in the face of uncertainty, and concerned with the dialogical choices available to interlocutors under particular circumstances, given their ostensible intentions and the available means of persuasion.[61] As a field, rhetoric draws upon the classical rhetorical tradition of ancient Greece and Rome as well as the theories of more recent philosophers of language and the insights of scholars and social scientists in the allied fields of literary studies, psychology, and linguistics.[62] Methodologically, rhetoric focuses on the purposive

51. Edwards 2007.

52. Ron Edwards, January 15, 2015, "LIE: 'Ron Edwards Says Regular Gamers are Brain-damaged,'" *Google+*, https://plus.google.com/116781946626781923658/posts/XqeEyZhU44U.

53. Ron Edwards, February 11, 2006, "Brain Damage," *The Forge Forums Read-Only Archives*, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=18707,

54. Levi Kornelsen, ibid.

55. Dev Purkayastha (DevP), February 2006, "Ron's Clarifying Threads on 'Brain Damage,'" *Story-Games*, http://www.story-games.com/forums/discussion/146/.

56. Clinton Nixon, ibid.

57. Edwards 2007.

58. Ron Edwards, November 1, 2010, "The Winter of the Forge Looms Near," *The Forge*, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=30635.

59. Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20110127191529/http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php.

60. Chris Chinn, November 1, 2010, "Last Call," *Deeper in the Game*, https://bankuei.wordpress.com/2010/11/01/last-call/.

61. William J. White, "The Interlocutor's Dilemma: The Place of Strategy in Dialogic Theory," *Communication Theory* 18 (2008): 5-26, discusses some of the philosophical issues that emerge from these sorts of theoretical commitments.

62. For the academic constitution of rhetoric, see Robert T. Craig, "The Speech Tradition," *Communication Monographs* 57 (1990): 309-314; for the relationship of rhetoric to related intellectual traditions, see Robert T. Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field," *Communication Theory* 9, no. 2 (1999): 119-161.

text as the site of inquiry[63] and syncretically applies interpretive methods—the judgment of the analyst, in other words—as its fundamental mode of operation. In this case, a rhetorical critique will (1) provide an orientation to the text in order to identify the interlocutors, their roles, and apparent intentions, (2) reconstruct the arguments offered by interlocutors, and (3) assess what those arguments suggest about the interlocutors and the perspectives they bring to the encounter. Note that as we begin, we have not yet firmly concluded who is trying to persuade whom of what (if anything); however, the thread has been systematically selected as an exemplar because it seems to be an instance of participants at the Forge grappling with the application of Forge theory in order to explore the dynamics of their own play.[64]

The particular thread that the remainder of this chapter will discuss began on April 18, 2006, in which a new poster calling himself "Buzz" posted a message to the Actual Play forum. Buzz asked for help using GNS to evaluate two superhero games "in order to get a better idea how to assess a given system from a Big Model/GNS perspective, hopefully with an aim toward application of theory in my own play."[65] The thread ultimately involved 9 participants who made a total of 66 posts between April 18 and May 14, 2006; those 66 posts comprised 53 turns, i.e., counting sequential posts by the same poster as a single turn. Of the nine people posting in the thread, three—Buzz, Ron (Edwards), and Storn—account for 89% of the posts (87% of turns). Five of the other six make only one post each; the last (Caldis) makes two. The adjacency relationships among posters in terms of who posts before and after whom can be used to diagram the proximity of each poster to each other (see Figure 4).

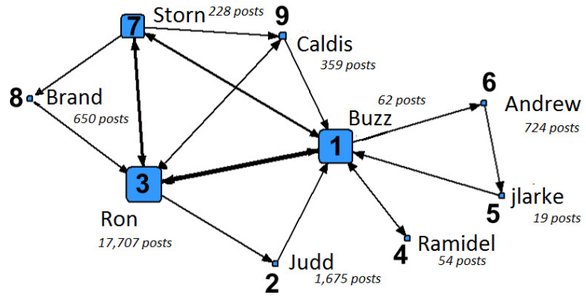


Figure 4: Patterns of interaction in Forge thread exemplar. Nodes are participants, labeled by first name and numbered by order of entry into the thread; arrows connect participants whose posts immediately precede or follow each other (or both), with arrowheads pointing to earlier entries (bidirectional arrows thus suggest a back-and-forth or exchange).

The size of the node representing each poster corresponds to the total number of turns taken by that individual; with Ron[66] taking the most (18 turns), Buzz next (17), and Storn third (11). Similarly, the thickness of the line between each pair of nodes indicates the average frequency with which the posters in each pair precede and follow each other. Thus, for example, Buzz follows Ron 11 times and Ron follows Buzz 9 times, for an average tie strength of 10, whereas Storn follows Ron 5 times and Ron follows Storn 7 times, for an average tie strength of 6. The arrowheads point to the poster who is immediately followed at some point in the discussion by the other participant in the thread. For example, Buzz is followed by Judd, who is followed by Ron—but Judd never follows Ron, and Buzz never follows Judd. Furthermore, each node is numbered according to the order in which the poster entered the thread.

This graph-theoretic visualization of the thread is intended merely to orient us to the conversation taking place within it, showing that the bulk of the thread is occupied by a three-way discussion between Buzz, Ron, and Storn. It seems likely at this point that Ron is leading the discussion—given the authority implicit in his overwhelmingly high post count—with Buzz in the role of primary interlocutor. Storn's role is not yet clear; he enters late and seems to go back and forth with Ron, and with Buzz to a lesser extent. Prior to this main discussion, there is a seemingly more diffident prefatory or ancillary conversation, which ends after Andrew's single contribution to the thread; a firmer grasp of what is happening requires a reconstruction of the discussion, to which we turn next.

This prefatory conversation does not seem to include Judd's contribution to the thread, which is sandwiched between Buzz's thread-starting original post and Ron's first contribution. In it, Judd reassures Buzz, who has expressed uncertainty about both posting etiquette and his own understanding of "the theory discussed around here," by welcoming him to the Forge and suggesting that he can "forget GNS" if he so desires. Ron's response initiates a conversation between him and Buzz but also *corrects* Judd, albeit mildly, "Um, I actually encourage your interest in the various Creative Agendas, Buzz," he says, "so it's up to you" whether or not the discussion turns in that direction. Ron adds that he has "about an hour of lecture" on a topic in which Buzz is interested—the application of the Big Model to a superhero game called *Champions*—but that it would be more productive for Buzz to describe at least one of his actual play experiences, in order to "create the context in which we can not only make all sorts of Creative Agenda things clear as day, but also help get across" points related to understanding *Champions* in terms of Forge theory. Judd does not return to the conversation after this, perhaps chastened by the correction or at least deferential to the authority claimed by Ron in his first post. However, notice that even though Ron rejects Judd's framing of the Actual Play forum as an atheoretical space, he immediately positions himself not as lecturer on theory, but as a potential co-participant with Buzz in a theoretically informed dialogue organized around actual play experiences.

In response to Ron, Buzz begins to describe a bi-weekly game in which he has been a player for about 3½ years. Immediately, his dissatisfaction with the game is made clear. Buzz notes that "outside of combat or issue[s] dealing directly with powers, there's not much of any die-rolling." This meant that Buzz's high-intelligence super-scientist character, who had been designed with the understanding that in-game puzzles or problems that might be amenable to intellectual or scientific solutions would be able to be addressed by the *character* using abilities listed on the character sheet, was at a disadvantage. "I may be making it sound worse than it is," he admits. "Still, I'm sometimes a little confused by how much energy will be spent assuring 'realistic' adjudication of Powers and combat actions, but the 'story' aspects are pretty much 'roleplay it out'"—i.e., without reference to the character's abilities. Notice how this partakes of the tension, described above, between GM authority and player agency; notice, too, the tone of uncertainty and hesitation—unhappiness, even—that Buzz brings to his account.

Ron's second turn in the thread takes place on turn 10, time stamped April 19, 9:38 am— 28 hours after the original post. This pace is of course glacial by Internet standards, but it suggests a communicative ethos of deliberate rumination rather than hyper-connected immediacy. It is in this interim that, as Buzz is beginning to offer his actual play experience in reply to Ron's prompt, posters Ramidel, jlarke, and Andrew testify briefly about the value of Forge concepts in facilitating their understanding of their own play.

"What I'm seeing in your description," Ron finally tells Buzz, "is a classic example, Drift-heavy Champions style, of incoherent play." In this case, "Drift-heavy" refers to the extent to which a GM alters the rules-as-written in order to satisfy his or her sense of how the game should work. "Incoherent play" refers to the particular sort of aimlessness associated with games in which it is not clear how players are to find enjoyment, satisfaction, or reward with the game. Ron points to specific elements of Buzz's description—e.g., "You'll see that there is . . . a very strong emphasis on GM expertise"—to ground his assessment. He adds, "Long experience leads me to think that you, right this minute, are at the cusp of realizing that somehow . . . everything seems to be becoming . . . repetitive." Notice how the theoretical language is deployed in the service of offering a candid account of how the experience of play *feels* to the interlocutor, asking the other in dialogue to reflect on his own thought process or experience of the world as an experience. This, it should hardly need to be said, is of course by definition phenomenological.[67]

Ron goes on to challenge Buzz on an element of his AP description, asking, "Are you really having a blast with each [moment of] spotlight [on your character]? You qualified it, when you said so." This motif of challenge recurs a number of times over the thread, with Ron in role of Socratic chief interlocutor identifying internal contradictions or pious hypocrisies employed by his conversational partner. For example, later in the thread, Ron challenges Buzz's characterization of the group. "So they're all good-natured and communicative, are they?" he says. "Is that why your 35-INT [i.e., high intelligence] character with all those deductive and perceptual skills was ignored as such? Your solution to that situation was to rewrite the character without the skills. Is that 'communication'?"

In this earlier instance, Buzz acknowledges the truth of Ron's challenge, and accepts the diagnosis of the source of his dissatisfaction with the game as related to

63. "Text" in this case can be construed rather broadly. In the context of games, Ian Bogost's concept of the "procedural rhetoric" embedded in the algorithmic logic of a computer game illustrates the point, cf. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); similarly, Cover 2010 adopts a rhetorical perspective on the construction of narrative in TRPG play.

64. Edwards suggests that a particular thread—specifically, Levi Kornelsen, July 31, 2006, "Frostfolk and GNS Aggravation," *The Forge Forums Read-Only Archive*, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=20679.0—more strongly exemplifies his own argumentative method (pers. comm.), but the selected thread was chosen for its focus on the original poster's dissatisfaction with his own play, which is not the case in Kornelsen.

65. Mark Delsing (as Buzz), April 18, 2006, "HERO System, M&M and Assessing Incoherence," *The Forge Forums Read-Only Archive*, http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=19543.

66. We will refer to all posters in this thread, including Ron Edwards, by their first name or assumed nom de plume to signal that we are treating them as the objects of analysis and participants in discourse rather than as authorities supporting claims.

67. See William J. White, "Player-Character is What You Are in the Dark: The Phenomenology of Immersion in Dungeons & Dragons," in *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Read and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks*, edited by Christopher Robichaud, 82-92 (Malden, MA: John Wiley, 2014) for a discussion of issues in the phenomenology of role-playing.

its incoherence. "I want to do cool, engrossing stuff," he says. "Sometimes the story we interact with or are witness to accomplishes this, sometimes it doesn't." Ron replies, "This business about your goal being to 'play your cool character' . . . ? That's like someone whose knees have been shot out saying, 'I just want to walk.'"[68] In this case, he means that he will need to correct what he regards as Buzz's misapprehension about the nature of *Champions.* Because of the "plethora of editions and habits and ideas" about *Champions* play that existed—different subsets of which were distributed differentially across playgroups—there emerged "more-or-less cargo cults of groups which were individually convinced they were playing the game 'right'." Different groups were thus able to play their version of *Champions* in ways that supported—or failed to support—the creative agenda preferences of those at the table. Completing this explanation, Ron asks Buzz, "Do you want to delve into what your group is doing *right now* in Big Model terms? Or do you want to talk about what you'd like to see, or get from play, and discuss that?"

It is at this point, two days and 18 hours after the beginning of the thread, that Storn enters the conversation, responding to Buzz's complaint about his high-intelligence character's skills being sidelined in play with a recommendation to use a "hero point" mechanism involving the expenditure of a limited resource to represent dealing with in-game obstacles or difficulties. Storn's contribution suggests that he is an experienced *Champions* player and that he is drawing upon that experience to offer a solution to Buzz's problem; the implication is that he is trying to cut to the heart of the issue and obviate the need for pointless further discussion.

However, Ron cautions Storn that while his enthusiasm is welcome, he should avoid assuming that the way that he plays *Champions* is automatically the "right way" to play the game. Storn defends his intentions, but ultimately defers to Ron; for his part, Ron thanks Storn for clarifying and observes that "our perceptions of [Buzz's] group differ a little," which influences their judgments about appropriate courses of action for Buzz to take in communicating with his fellow players about what he wants from the game. The effect is to establish Storn as Ron's peer and colleague in the inquiry about the *Champions*-related play preferences of Buzz and his group, in that Ron acknowledges Storn's expertise but seeks to guide or channel it in the service of the didactic purpose of the thread. In doing so, Ron's persona is that of the cautious diagnostician not yet ready to issue a prescription. It is actually a rather skillful de-escalation of a potentially conflictual exchange.

Meanwhile, in talking to Buzz about his play preferences, Ron asks Buzz to engage in honest self-reflection and presentation. "I'm going to ask you to stick very closely to your initial reason for starting this thread—*dissatisfaction*," he tells him. "Grab onto that dissatisfaction as the foundation and driving force for this dialogue." He then draws out from Buzz's description of a satisfying play experience the features of the game that seem to be what Buzz is looking for but not getting, e.g. character empowerment, player engagement, actions with consequences, adequate spotlight time, and satisfying long-term play. Buzz acknowledges his back-pedaling, admits that he is in fact dissatisfied, and wonders what can be done about it. "How can I approach [*Champions*] in a way that incorporates what we've been talking about and what I've learned from the Forge?"

In reply, Ron links out to another Forge thread that argued that trying to subtly alter the Creative Agenda of a group by "sneaking up" on a new play style was almost certainly bound to fail. Other posters in the thread confirm this seemingly well-established assertion. In response, Buzz says, "I feel like I'm still waiting for practical advice with specific regard to [*Champions*]." Ron replies, "I thought of a good way to do it concretely." He directs Buzz to "make up a character" for a superheroic game using the *Champions* rules, and then he will show Buzz how to prepare as a GM for a character-driven game. He invites Storn to do the same, to help with the exercise, further engaging him as a collaborator in the project to teach Buzz about Forge-derived techniques.

At this point, the conversation moves into its final main phase. Over the course of the next few days, Storn and Buzz post their respective creations, light-wielding magician Beacon and gravity-manipulating Boy Scout-cum-Special Forces trooper Polestar. Ron criticizes them in game-mechanical terms, but also evaluates them conceptually, pointing to ways in which the characters can be tightened up thematically and tied to one another in interesting ways. This weaving together of character backstories allows the GM to focus the game on player agency rather than GM plot. "Now turn to the players," Ron advises. "What the characters decide to do in the face of this opening and constant input is utterly up to them. Playing in this fashion means that the second half, at least, of any given game session is totally, totally up for grabs and I as GM cannot and should not pre-plan it."

The remainder of the thread involves Ron reinforcing the points he was making about story-focused play while Storn and Buzz offer defenses of particular approaches they took in designing their sample characters for the thread. Ron gently pushes back on Buzz. "One thing I'm not seeing in your posts," Ron says, "is acknowledgement regarding my points to you." Buzz's reply is somewhat defensive. "I tried to repeat back to you what I understand your point to be," he says, then restates the principles that he thinks have emerged from the discussion: a strong emphasis on communication among members of the play group and a disciplined approach to character creation so that it serves to drive the in-game action. The thread wraps up with Buzz and Storn indicating their satisfaction with its outcome and Ron declaring the thread closed.

This reconstruction of a Forge actual play thread shows the work of the Forge being done, and highlights the theory-informed dialogic method that underlies that work. Notice that Judd—next to Ron the most-frequent poster on the Forge participating in the thread—was attempting to engage with Buzz in almost the same way as Ron, by getting him to discuss his actual play experiences; Ron's correction added a theoretical dimension to the actual play discussion rather than re-orienting the conversation to Forge theory. That theory is supposed to be deployed reflexively, it seems—that is, in an effort to make sense of one's own play style, game preferences, and experiences of play. One talks about one's own play, in other words, in order to interrogate the choices one is making at the table and in the fiction and understand what's going on in one's own head as the game is proceeding.

This stands in contrast with other modes of recounting actual play. Certainly, it goes beyond the offer to "tell you about my character" of the unself-conscious *D&D*er.[69] However, it also focuses attention on something different than is emphasized in other traditions of play. For example, the Nordic larp scene concerns itself with comprehensive photographic and procedural documentation as the most desirable mode of recording "actual play."[70] While those Scandinavian accounts do pay attention to the psychological effects of play on the player, they are much less concerned than AP in the Forge tradition is with the metacommunicative intentionality[71] of the account—with, in other words, how the player's orientation to play shapes the experience of the game.

Furthermore, the Forge tradition of AP discussion as phenomenological dialogue has the potential to augment the Goffman-derived frame-analytic approach to the scholarly examination of play that has become almost the default method in the very small literature of tabletop role-playing.[72] That is, the dialogic interrogation of a player's intentionality in play, even retrospectively, can add robustness to ethnographic accounts of play experience. Too much can be made of this, to be sure, but as a methodological adjunct to more traditional interview methods, it may hold some promise.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Forge's focus on actual play in its particular way is a not-well-understood aspect of the character of the Forge. Actual play has the potential to be valuable to analog game scholars, at least, for the alternate perspective it offers on TRPG play. Each of the component parts of the essay contribute to that argument: first, we saw how Forge theory—or the Big Model—directed attention to introspective accounts of play as requisite evidence for making judgments about creative agenda preferences or disagreements. Second, we saw how the changing forum structures and rules over time shifted the focus of the site from RPG theory debates to discussion of actual play. Finally, we examined a specific exemplary instance of Forge AP discourse and saw how the conversation moved away from theory and toward a self-reflexive or introspective engagement with a subject's own play via dialogue with a skilled or knowledgeable interlocutor.

Rhetoric, as a method, by focusing on the agency of interlocutors, directs our attention to the use of skillful communicative practices, and these are certainly in evi-

68. Arguably, this reference to disability may be a defiant nod to the brain damage controversy.

69. See Mark Barrowcliffe, *The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons, and Growing Up Strange* (New York: Soho Press, 2008) for an excruciatingly mortifying description of such an episode.

70. Juhana Pettersson, "Pix or It Didn't Happen," in *Larp, the Universe, and Everything*, edited by Matthijs Holter, Eirik Fatland, and Even Tømte, 131-144 (Oslo, Norway: Knutepunkt, 2009) encourages photographic documentation, and Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola, in *Nordic Larp* (Stockholm, Sweden: Fëa Livia, 2010), assemble a series of lushly illustrated and thickly described procedural accounts of exemplary Nordic larps.

71. In the Husserlian sense of consciousness directed at itself rather than its surroundings, David Woodruff Smith and Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality: A Study of Mind, Meaning, and Language* (London, England: D. Reidel, 1982), 5-6.

72. This approach can be traced back to the seminal ethnographic work of Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983); it is central to Daniel MacKay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) as well as visible in both Cover 2010 and Dennis D. Waskul, "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity, and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, 19-38 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland).

dence in the Forge AP thread. However, what allows us to categorize the communication encounter of the thread as dialogic is the participants' orientations toward mutual understanding, their willingness to engage with each other, and the invitational character of their interaction. The discussion leader draws out the original poster, challenging him in a firm, but friendly way to strive for greater honesty and authenticity of insight, and enlists a late-arriving interlocutor into the discursive project of the thread by getting him on-side rather than shutting him down.

The thread thus seems on its face to refute the charges of pretension, elitism, and obscurantism directed at the Forge by its critics. However, we do see signs of the presence and operations of power, in the deference that others showed Ron Edwards as chief interlocutor and in their occasional defensiveness when subjected to criticism by him. At the same time, we can imagine the possibility that the controversy over the "brain damage" remarks—only a few months old when the thread was started—shaped the invitational gentleness of Edwards' approach to the thread as well as producing a kind of selection bias, in that to the extent that those remarks drove some members away, the remainder would be either low-information novices or highly committed regulars.

Nonetheless, the Forge archives offer a rich corpus of TRPG-related texts that are worth exploring. They have the potential to allow insights and understandings of TRPG play unavailable anywhere else.

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Introduction to the Academic Section

Sarah Lynne Bowman

The articles featured in this year's Academic Section of the *Wyrd Con Companion Book* each have a decidedly critical and progressive aim. All of the articles this year focus on role-playing from the perspective of various facets of critical theory, with four out of five articles examining the potential affordances and thematic drawbacks of tabletop role-playing systems. While each of the authors praise the possibilities that interactive storytelling can offer, these articles offer a variety of different ways in which designers and players can improve the role-playing experience to facilitate greater empathy, more nuanced cultural exploration, a higher diversity of identification, and less desensitized affect around violence.

As in the last two years, the *Companion Book* has featured double-blind peer review from scholars in the field. In addition, this year, **Maury Brown**, Ph.D. candidate in Rhetoric & Cultural Studies and **Tara Leederman**, a doctoral student in English Literature, provided excellent initial feedback for the abstracts in both the journalistic and academic sections. These preliminary comments helped authors in both tracks shape their work, an especially invaluable resource for individuals submitting their articles for review. In order to cultivate further the academic discourse community of role-play studies, our excellent list of peer reviewers includes both emerging and established scholars:

Steven Dashiell, doctoral student in Language, Literacy, and Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Janelle Davis, M.A. in Cultural Studies from the University of Washington Bothell

Gabriel de los Angeles, doctoral student in Learning Science and Human Development at the University of Washington

J. Tuomas Harviainen, Ph.D. in Information Studies and Interactive Media from the University of Tampere, Finland

Nicholas Mizer, Ph.D. in Anthropology at Texas A&M University

Evan Torner, Ph.D. in Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

Dimitra Nikolaidou, Ph.D. candidate in American Literature and Culture at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

William J. White, Ph.D. in Communication, Information, and Library Studies at Rutgers University

I am deeply grateful for the comments made by each of these individuals, which have significantly improved the quality of the drafts in this academic portion of the *Companion Book*.

The first article in our volume is "Breaking the Alibi: Fostering Empathy by Reuniting the Player and Character" by **Maury Brown** and **Benjamin A. Morrow**. Brown and Morrow explore the concepts of cognitive and affective empathy from a psychological perspective, connecting these processes with aspects of the role-playing experience, including the phenomena of double consciousness, alibi, immersion, and bleed. While role-playing is often touted by scholars and educators as a vehicle for identification between player and character, Brown and Morrow take this concept a step further, advocating for a style of enactment called Playing for Empathy. This mode of engagement encourages greater empathic understanding between players, facilitating greater opportunities for player empowerment and improved communal health. This work necessarily complicates the concept of alibi in role-playing theory, which allows players to obviate responsibility from themselves for character actions. Instead, playing for empathy suggests that player-to-player communication, empathy, and consent are vital to optimal play experiences.

Along similar lines, **Janelle Davis** further explores the concept of role-playing as a vehicle for increased empathy and cultural awareness through character identification. In "'Trickster Remembers:' Negotiating Morality and Identity in Tabletop Gaming Through Trickster Mythology," Davis describes the ways in which she attempted to generate greater awareness of the issues historically faced by Native Americans during the colonization period by setting her tabletop role-playing scenario in a boarding school designed to assimilate Native children into White culture. While Davis' recognizes the potential drawbacks of White designers and players enacting such narratives – including the tendency for players to fall back on stereotypes due to minimal knowledge of the cultures involved – this article demonstrates how role-playing scenarios can offer insight into the normatively suppressed or erased experiences of marginalized groups. When deployed with sensitivity in design and

enactment, such experiences can lead to a greater sense of empathy for marginalized people and an increased interest in learning about diverse cultural backgrounds.

TiMar Long also addresses issues of race in tabletop gaming by examining how race is visually represented in various sourcebooks for *Dungeons & Dragons*. Focusing upon the artwork of player-characters in the *Player's Handbook*, Long provides an extensive content analysis of the images in these volumes, numerically evaluating the degree of representation of Black, Asian, Native American, Arab, White, and demi-human characters. While Long demonstrates that the number of these representations improved over time when compared with demographic information from the U.S. census, overall, many races experienced underrepresentation or, in some cases, symbolic annihilation, which occurs when a race is stereotyped or rendered nearly invisible. As the artwork in these classic texts helps frame the imagined possibilities of these fantasy worlds, Long advocates for including a greater array of non-stereotyped images of people of color in the artwork of role-playing games, as well as a call for additional research in this field.

In "Player Choices in Tabletop RPGs: The Greek Connection," **Dimitra Nikolaidou** also examines representation in classic tabletop role-playing games, specifically *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness. In this case, however, Dimitra focuses upon the ways in which the settings and the rules of these games encourage the enactment of American tropes and values. Providing quantitative data from her long-term gaming group in Greece, Nikolaidou demonstrates how, while players enjoy the opportunity to escape reality by enacting fantastic scenarios, the design of these classic games imposes American values onto play, which limits the ability for Greek players to express their cultural identity. While the author praises the World of Darkness' attempts at diversity in setting, she explains how stereotypes still inform these representations and how groups must work to facilitate more authentic expressions of national identity within the provided Americanized gameframe.

Finally, **Evan Torner** also critiques the values inherent to the logic of tabletop games, in this case through the lens of examining combat mechanics. Torner evaluates the procedural experience of traditional tabletop combat as reducing the meaning of both bodies and time to numbers and statistics, as the violent defeat of dehumanized foes is a necessary step for story and character advancement in games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and its descendants. While Torner explains how later games attempt to better weave these encounters into the story in order to produce meaning, the basis of procedural combat works to produce an affective response in the player that minimizes the realistic consequences of violence, such as the inconvenience of body disposal. In this regard, Torner is echoing the common insistence that "system does matter," in the sense that the ways in which games are designed incentivize certain behavior, including a detached and dehumanized approach to violent encounters, which are often considered necessary, if "empty" acts of labor by players. Ultimately, the article advocates for a critical examination of such mechanical incentive systems and an eye toward designing with greater regard for human and animal life, even in a fictionalized setting.

Overall, the articles in this volume demonstrate a nuanced and sophisticated look at the complicated issues that surround the interactive storytelling experience. While, in most cases, the authors offer only preliminary solutions, the tenor of these pieces advocates for a stronger consideration of the affective impact of role-playing games and the potential for these experiences to influence identity formation, self-exploration, empathy, and cultural understanding. In none of these cases do the authors suggest throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, as each type of game is shown to hold merit. However, these articles demonstrate that games still have room to grow in order to produce more diverse experiences that are sensitive to the subjectivities of others.

—*Sarah Lynne Bowman*
Austin, TX
December 11, 2015

Breaking the Alibi: Fostering Empathy by Reuniting the Player and Character

Maury Brown and Benjamin A. Morrow

Abstract

Roleplaying has relied on a strict separation of player and character, a boundary that has been theorized and defended through the concepts of alibi, immersion, and bleed. We posit that such reliance on what is an artificial separation can create a style of play that lacks accountability, care, or concern for others. Using psychological and neurocognitive research as well as game studies theory, we demonstrate that empathy is an inherent value developed in live action role-play (larp), as players take on the perspective of characters and participate in a shared imaginative space. However, the cognitive and affective empathy fostered by larping can become *actionable* as players make choices to alter their play. We introduce a playstyle that we call Playing for Empathy, which we define as the recognition of a bisociation of player and character that allows for players to make choices that consider the feelings of other players and the consequences to others of in-game actions. Playing for Empathy elevates the collective co-created experience beyond personal gain. We offer a heuristic for examining a game's design and the ensuing emergent play for explicit and implicit power structures that may foster or preclude playing for empathy. We close by applying the theory to a set of practical strategies that players, designers, and gaming communities can use to foster play for empathy and empower players with agency.

Introduction

Empathy is a concept with multiple definitions and modalities. Considerable disagreements exist among scholars and disciplines regarding its origins and effects. In role-playing game studies, empathy has been discussed to some degree, primarily with regard to how role-playing in general encourages perspective-taking, itself a type of empathy. Taking on a role offers "the benefit of a sort of 'double consciousness' in which the player's identity is relaxed while the role is enacted."[1] This process results in an "aesthetic doubling," whereby "the character is at once alien and part of the player herself, and in defining the boundaries between player and character, the player is forced into a meta-cognitive process."[2] Researchers exploring the use of live action role-play (larp) in education and training[3] have demonstrated that the adoption of a role not only contributes to a greater awareness of one's own perspective, but also tends to increase

1. Brian Bates, *The Way of the Actor: A Path to Knowledge & Power* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1988), 72.

2. Sanne Harder, "Confessions of a Schoolteacher: Experiences with Role-playing in Education," in *Lifelike*, edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, and Line Thorup (Copenhagen, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP07), 230; Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Educational Live Action Role-Playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014), 124.

3. Bowman, 2014.

understanding of the perspectives of others.[4] Larp allows for the imaginative experience of considering what another person may think and feel, both through the adoption of the character role and also through the immersive interactive play with others in the shared imaginative space. This characteristic is inherent in the larp medium itself; to access a larp, one must adopt the perspective and persona of a character.

Through the imaginative perspective-taking of a character role, and the enactment of choices from that alternate perspective through the play, roleplay affords empathy. Research has shown empathy to be activated through imaginative engagement, particularly with literary fiction,[5] and researchers also correlate this empathic reaction to how well the reader or viewer is transported into the fictional landscape or immersed in a believable world.[6] Unlike the experience of reading fiction, watching a movie, or playing a first-person RPG, larps produce not only immersion for an individual player into a character, they also produce "inter-immersion,"[7] or a shared immersive experience as multiple players individually immerse in character and are responsible together to create a believable fiction that emerges as imagined reality. This distinction is important to understand. Most roleplaying scholarship concerning empathy refers to the experience of a player imagining him/herself as the character, honing what psychologist Jean Piaget referred to as the "theory of mind."[8] This capacity of imagining what other people are thinking; predicting their behavior and intentions; and speculating about their concerns and beliefs is used in improv, stage-acting, role-play, and psychodrama.[9] Using this definition of empathy that follows from the theory of mind, the empathic response in a larp is from the *player to the character*. Although we agree that this type of empathy occurs in larps, we see it as a means to an end. The initial identification with, and empathy for, a character becomes a tool or a method that allows for empathy to occur on the level of *player to player*.

This chapter outlines some of the various conceptions of empathy, then defines how empathy is not only an outcome of larp, but can be an active strategy for accessing the larp medium and experience. We describe a type of play that we advocate as actualized and actionable empathy: playing in a dual-conscious state of player and character, and making in-game choices that consider other players and contribute to the collective experience. We refer to this play style as Playing for Empathy (PfE). Using a framework of role-play studies theory concepts such as alibi; immersion; implicit and explicit game rules; and steering; we apply theories of performance and embodied cognition to examine a game's structure and ethos in terms of the feasibility of Playing for Empathy. We close with a variety of practical strategies to cultivate Playing for Empathy as both a player style and as a community ethos. Our purpose is to demonstrate how larps not only inherently foster empathy through their design and enactment, but also afford the opportunity to turn the capacity for, and the feeling of, empathy into actions. These in-game actions are enacted by a character, but chosen by a player who acts empathetically. These choices affect the outcome of the game itself, and also make it more meaningful for players both during play and long after the game is over, when the bodily experience of empathy and agency afforded by and enacted in the game remain with players through the memories and neural connections forged during the experience.

4. Bowman, 2014, 124; Downing, Agnes. "A Critical Examination of Role Playing as a Model of Teaching." Proceedings from the *24th Conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association*, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, July 3-6, 1994, 4; Harder, 234; Brummel et al., "Development of Role-play Scenarios for Teaching Responsible Conduct of Research," *Sci Eng Ethics* 16 (2010): 574; Martin Eckhoff Andresen, "Bringing Fiction Alive: An Introduction for Education and Recreation," in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckhoff Andresen, 10-19. (Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012), 17; Mikko Meriläinen, "The Self-Perceived Effects of the Role-Playing Hobby on Personal Development—a Survey Report," *International Journal of Role-Playing*, no. 3 (2012): 50; David Simkins, *The Arts of Larp: Design, Literacy, Learning and Community in Live-Action Role Play* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2015), 170; Jason Matthew Cox, "Role-Playing Games in Arts, Research and Education," *International Journal of Education through Art* 10, no. 3 (2014): 381–95.

5. David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* 342, no. 6156 (October 18, 2013): 377–80.

6. Bal and Veltkamp, "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation" *PLoS ONE*: 8, no. 1 (2013): 2.

7. Mike Pohjola, "Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities," in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2004).

8. Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: Free Press, 1997). Originally published 1932.

9. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Connecting Role-Playing, Stage Acting, and Improvisation," *Analog Game Studies*, accessed September 18, 2015, http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/05/connecting-role-playing-stage-acting-and-improvisation/.

What is Empathy?

As mentioned, empathy has a variety of definitions and modes, so we will clarify the concept of empathy as we use it before continuing. Gestalt psychologists[10] and behavioral scientists[11] discuss *cognitive empathy,* or the human ability to understand another's emotional state. Cognitive empathy is the thinking reaction whereby a person identifies and understands other people's emotions and needs. "I can tell that she is feeling sad," for example. Cognitive empathy refers to a thinking capacity, an intellectual conception of another's point of view, and not mimicry or transfer of feelings. Piaget believed empathy was an intellectual activity that developed as a child's brain gained the capacity to understand from another's perspective. This allowed for a move from egocentrism to sociocentrism and the cognitive ability to conceptualize overall life conditions in addition to immediate circumstances.[12] Someone using cognitive empathy can think beyond the current situation and bodily reaction to a time in the past or a speculation for the future. This state of intellectually understanding how another might or must feel, of being able to take on another point of view is sometimes known as the "theory of mind," after Piaget's term, and some distinguish this intellectual capacity for understanding of another's feelings from the experience of empathy itself. We see cognitive empathy as a design feature and a task of role-play. In order to portray a character, one must speculate about how that character would think or feel in various circumstances. Role-playing games in their design facilitate using the empathetic capacity, known either as theory of mind or cognitive empathy.

Affective empathy, on the other hand, is the experience of actually feeling what another feels.[13] Sometimes called emotional empathy,[14] affective empathy is the emotional reaction that happens through mirror neurons and amygdala reactions, as you physically experience something as if it were happening to you, often through subconscious mimicry.[15] This concept can be further divided into two categories of empathic reaction: emotional reciprocity or "the process by which one individual comes to feel the emotions of another, as when one person's distress arouses distress in another"; and emotional complementarity, "when one person's emotions evoke different but corresponding emotions in others, as when one person's distress arouses compassion in another."[16] As feelings are transferred among members of the group through affective empathy reactions, this process can lead to emotional contagion,[17] as more people share the experience. Activating affective or emotional empathy requires tuning in to another person's feelings by reading their facial expressions, tone of voice, and a host of other nonverbal signs as they are emitted, something that researchers have studied, codified,[18] and can be taught.[19] Recent research has found that affective empathy also occurs through the stimulation of the imagination through fiction, books, movies, and games.[20]

10. Wolfgang Kohler, *Gestalt Psychology: An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1970). Originally published 1929.

11. Piaget, 1997.

12. Ibid.

13. Ezra Stotland, "Exploratory Investigations of Empathy," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, volume 4, edited by L. Berkowitz (New York/London: Academic Press, 1969), 271–314.; C. Daniel Batson et al., "Empathic Joy and the Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 61, no. 3 (1991): 413–26; Martin L. Hoffman, "Interaction of Affect and Cognition in Empathy," in *Emotions, Cognition, and Behavior*, edited by Carroll E. Izard, Jerome Kagan, and Robert B. Zajonc (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 103–30.

14. Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Bantam, 2007).

15. Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard L. Rapson, "Emotional Contagion," in *Current Directions in Psychological Sciences*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 96–99.

16. Gerben A. van Kleef et al., "Power, Distress, and Compassion: Turning a Blind Eye to the Suffering of Others," *Psychological Science* 19, no. 12 (December 2008): 1315.

17. Hatfield et. al., 1993, 97.

18. Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*, First Edition (New York, N.Y.: Holt Paperbacks, 2004).

19. Goleman, 2003, 2007; Margaret E. Kemeny et al., "Contemplative/emotion Training Reduces Negative Emotional Behavior and Promotes Prosocial Responses," *Emotion* 12, no. 2 (April 2012): 338–50.

20. Bal and Veltkamp, 2013.

Evidence suggests that "seeing or reading about another person experiencing specific emotions and events activates the same neural structures as if one was experiencing them oneself, consequently influencing empathy."[21] Thus, one can feel empathy for a fictional character, or experience bodily reactions and neural processes through imaginative experiences, such as role-play. In larp, our bodies are also at play, so the opportunity to experience affective empathy exists both through the imagination and through our physical bodies and senses, which are in proximity to and interacting with others.

Researchers have noted that complementary emotional responses as produced by empathy tend to motivate prosocial behavior, which then strengthens relationships and understanding.[22] Recently psychologists and educators have discussed "compassionate empathy" or "empathic concern,"[23] whereby after feeling and thinking, you may make the conscious choice to take a helpful and/or righteous action on behalf of another. As games and education scholar David Simkins notes, empathy "is not just understanding of another's plight or emotions, but understanding of their perspective, including but not limited to their motivations, reasons, beliefs, fears, desires, or concerns."[24] Once we perceive and understand another's perspective, then we may be able to actively respond to the experience through choices that demonstrate awareness, engage with the other person, or work toward improving the situation. In a larp, a player who immerses into character considers the complexity and nuances of perspective of their own character, but also has the opportunity to imagine others with this same complexity and awareness. As a game, larp affords players with the agency to take meaningful action motivated by this empathic concern.

Larps are collaborative, co-created, interactive, communal storytelling experiences that offer the opportunity for individual players to experience cognitive and affective empathy and to take deliberate action as a result. Many players experience affective empathy as an involuntary epiphany that is bolstered by the embodied role-play. However, each player can also consciously exercise their cognitive empathy through their choices in play, thus engaging *active empathy* by expressing empathic concern through actions taken through their characters. When players experience empathy and make in-game choices as a result, they are Playing for Empathy (PfE). Furthermore, as more and more individuals play with empathy, they can enact an ethos of empathic concern; through this kind of emotional contagion—when emotions are transferred among participants—the collective game experience is altered. Games, through their design and mechanics, and gaming communities, through their ethos of play and participation, make Playing for Empathy more or less feasible within their designed and emergent systems.

Regulating Play and Empathy by Design and Social Contract

Unlike computer games, where the number of choices a participant can make or the types of interactions a player can have with the game are finite and hard-coded, in an improvisational larp, characters do not always follow designed programming. The spontaneous decisions players make in a larp both individually and in interaction with each other create an emergent ethos that can result in deviation—for good or ill—from the intended design. As a way to enforce behaviors and create limits for play, players of rules and mechanics attempt to place a measure of control on the random actions of live players.[25] However, these rules and mechanics do not themselves fully mitigate the cultural and social norms subconsciously enacted by the players. Even with rules and mechanics, the vigilance of GMs, and community awareness, out-of-game power structures can be replicated, as the empowerment that is possible from games is often distributed in normative ways rather than through more open possibilities afforded by play. Although larps are a type of participatory design[26] in which players actively attempt to include multiple stakeholders, not all player-designers may participate equally or have voices with equal clout. This inequality may be a result of in-game constraints such as character design or game mechanics, or out-of-game characteristics, particularly player skills or aspects of the players' physical bodies and how they align with the dominant social hierarchy. Bodies that correspond to existing social norms may also become dominant in play, even if unconsciously.

21. Ibid., p. 2.

22. van Kleef et al., 2008, p. 1315.

23. Goleman, 2007.

24. Simkins, 2015, p. 170.

25. Markus Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1, no. 1 (2009): 22–36.

26. Henry Jenkins et al., "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," *MacArthur Foundation Publication* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1–59; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,* Revised edition (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

Depending on the game's structure, mechanics and play ethos, as well as the player's in- and out-of-game privilege, some players and some games may require more effort to create the conditions for Playing for Empathy. Indeed, some games are designed to actively curtail empathetic identification with others. Such games reward play that tends toward privileging individual goals over the collective experience or exploiting perceived weaknesses in characters or players for personal gain. The following questions are helpful to consider when determining how a game's design or ethos might foster or preclude empathy (see table below):

Attribute	Questions to help determine design or play ethos
Power	▪ What kind of power and authority exist within the game structure? ▪ Who holds that power? What observations can be made about those who are cast in powerful roles? What intersectional factors might be at play, such as gender, age, experience, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.? ▪ How does one gain power within the system? Can power be gained at all?
Conflict (who, when, how)	▪ How does conflict emerge? ▪ Do cliques of characters drive conflict based on who does and does not have membership in the clique? ▪ Does conflict come to the players via NPCs directed by the game's organizers?
Hierarchy and Agency	▪ Is the game hierarchical? Is a character's relevance determined by their position on a chain of command? ▪ Does conflict emerge within the chain by subordinates defying commanders, or by commanders abusing subordinates? ▪ To what extent can a player subvert these hierarchies or take action outside of them?
Victory conditions and conflict resolution	▪ Does the game system and culture encourage conflicts between players (PvP), against the environment (PvE), or both? ▪ How is conflict resolved? Diplomatic concessions? ▪ Threats and intimidation? Violence? Character death? ▪ How does one "win" in this game?
Play ethos (what is valued)	▪ When players recount their experiences with other players after the game is over, what kind of stories are they telling? Deep and profound emotional experiences? Cool stories? Humorous anecdotes? Outrageous choices and actions?

While not definitive, the overall trend of the gameplay and the experiences of the players can be observed. Some signs that the game's structure, culture, or other emergent circumstances do not foster empathetic play include:

- if the game has the same players granted power and influence all the time;
- if the game's conflicts are clique-driven and only resolved by physical violence or punitive social measures such as humiliation (emotional violence);
- if the hierarchical structure conflicts are all about abusing subordinates;
- if the narratives told of the game are exclusively self-interested "cool stories" about successfully taking punitive, retaliatory, or aggressive actions at the expense of other players;
- if players who attempt to subvert these structures are punished through in-game or out-of-game structures such as an ambush, duty assignment, or ostracization;
- if players who speak up about having a poor experience are ignored or actively shamed, e.g. told to "walk it off" or to "stop being over-sensitive."

Games that include one or more of these characteristics may actually have designs or social contracts that actively encourage callous play and discourage empathy altogether.

In addition, a game that ostensibly seeks to examine problematic societal elements may, by design or by the enactment of play by the players, instead reify them, the game becoming an excuse or alibi to perform them. By rewarding and incentivizing callous actions, and punishing and deterring empathetic ones, a game can not only discourage empathetic play, but also teach players not to feel empathy.

Due to the emergence of dominant normativities into a game despite its design, the community ethos of what constitutes ethical play becomes all the more important. In addition to explicit rules and concrete mechanics, an adjustment to the implicit rules in the ethos of play that is created and maintained through the social contract between players is needed, sometimes as the game unfolds. In larp, players are given the agency to define their characters[27] and play emerges dynamically based on the speech and actions placed into the game. Because of this agency and the emergent and recursive nature of the play, participants can make new choices in response to diegetic or non-diegetic elements. Thus, even in a game that is designed to privilege violence and hyper-competitiveness, or in a culture upheld by a social contract that rewards betrayal and power maneuvers, individual players have the means—if they have the will—to choose a style of play that considers others before taking action. When players elect to consider the outcome of their actions on other characters, but especially on other players embodying those characters, we call that Playing for Empathy.

What Do We Mean by Playing for Empathy?

Fundamentally, to larp means to play not only as another by taking on the role of a character, but *with* another; the game does not exist until it is improvised and experienced by two or more players in interaction. Playing for Empathy means playing with the awareness that one's actions affect others. When Playing for Empathy, a player makes choices that consider the individual in relation to *others*, not merely as an individual interacting with a system or framework, such as the game rules, mechanics, or setting. Our conception of Playing for Empathy aligns with the Meilahti model, which posits that "a role-playing game is what is created in the *interaction* between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework."[28] We also align with a key principle of the Dogmatists, who hold that what happens in the interaction of the players is the reality of the larp. By Playing for

Empathy, we seek to "develop the potential of larp as a medium of expression, not as a glorified game of strategy,"[29] a goal that is central to the Dogma 99 Manifesto, and one that moves away from gamist principles[30] that privilege an individual's

27. Montola, 2009, 24.

28. Henri Hakkarainen and Jaakko Stenros, "The Meilahti School: Thoughts on Role-Playing," in *As Larp Grows up: Theory and Methods in Larp*, edited by Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander (Frederiksberg: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003), pp. 56–63.

29. Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård, "The Dogma 99 Manifesto," in *As Larp Grows up: Theory and Methods in Larp*, edited by Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander (Frederiksberg: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003). p. 21.

30. Petter Bøckman, "The Three Way Model: Revision of the Threefold Model," in *As Larp Grows Up*, edited by Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander (Knudepunkt, 2003), 12–16.

desired victory over other concerns.

Furthermore, Playing for Empathy requires the recognition that not all players and characters have equal access to the currency of the game, either by design, character skills, player abilities, or the reification of out-of-game social norms and dominant power structures. Social power, or "the relative influence an individual exerts over other people's outcomes,"[31] is experienced through a sense of control, agency, and freedom.[32] Research has shown that those with more social power have diminished reciprocal[33] emotional responses and motor resonance through the mirror neuron system, as "high-power participants [demonstrate] lower levels of resonance than low-power participants, suggesting reduced mirroring of other people in those with power."[34] This effect is seen even when people are only temporarily given power[35] and are then asked to react empathetically. This research has implications for the power structures both designed into games and enacted through their play; those with more power have less incentive or even ability to play for empathy.

However, this research also demonstrates that the capacity to feel empathy is malleable and can be directly influenced. Participants can be primed to feel empathy by engaging in complex works of fiction, for example, or by engineering power structures—such as rules, mechanics and norms—that make empathic reactions more likely. In addition, research suggests that people who hold a malleable mindset about empathy by believing it can be developed are more willing to attempt to be empathetic when challenged to do so than are people who believe empathy is an innate and fixed capacity.[36] Thus, demonstrating to participants how to play for empathy becomes not only an active strategy to change play, but also becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in that the greater the belief in the ability to effect change by engaging with empathy, the more likely the player will attempt to do so. As they make the choices that constitute play, this reinforcement then creates an emotional contagion as more and more players are motivated to consider power relations and the effect on others.

Redefining Concepts of Role-Play: Alibi, Immersion, Bleed

There are three central concepts in role-playing theory that are problematized as a result of considering the character as a series of choices enacted by the player, and not a separate entity that arises from the player. These seminal concepts include immersion, bleed, and alibi. Each of these theoretical concepts relies on a clear demarcation of where the player ends and character begins.

Immersion, though a deeply contested term in and of itself, has come to mean in role-playing more than a state of deep mental involvement. Scholars generally agree that immersion refers to both a goal of role-play and a state of identification with a character and a world that is achieved as a result of some sort of process, which may be enhanced with various methods and tools.[37]

When immersed, a player feels that, in a profound way, they are the character, a subjective experience that changes the player's usual interpretive framework. Thus, immersion requires, at a minimum, that players experience cognitive empathy, since immersion with a character is a process of taking on the perspective of a fictional entity. While immersion encourages empathy between player and character, it does not require that the empathy extends to another character and the player embodying it, which is key to Playing for Empathy.

Although the immersive break between the player's primary identity and the character is often

31. van Kleef et.al., 2008, 1315-1316.

32. Susan T. Fiske, "Controlling Other People: The Impact of Power on Stereotyping," *American Psychologist* 48, no. 6 (1993): 621–28, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.48.6.621.

33. van Kleef et. al., 2008, 1315, 1317.

34. Jeremy Hogeveen, Michael Inzlicht, and Sukhvinder S. Obhi, "Power Changes How the Brain Responds to Others," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143, no. 2 (2014): 755–62.

35. Hogeveen, Inzlicht, and Obhi, 2014, 756.

36. Karina Schumann, Jamil Zaki, and Carol S. Dweck, "Addressing the Empathy Deficit: Beliefs about the Malleability of Empathy Predict Effortful Responses When Empathy Is Challenging," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107, no. 3 (2014): 475–93.

37. Lauri Lukka, "The Psychology of Immersion: Individual Differences and Psychosocial Phenomena Relating to Immersion," in *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp*, edited by Jon Back (Knutpunkt, 2014).; Ari-Pekka Lappi, "Playing Beyond Facts: Immersion as a Transformation of Everydayness," in *Lifelike*, ed. Jesper Donnis et al. (Copenhagen: Projektgruppen KP07, 2007), 74–79; Tobias Harding, "Immersion Revisited: Role-Playing as Interpretation and Narrative," in *Lifelike*, edited by Jesper Donnis et al. (Copenhagen: Projektgruppen KP07, 2007), 25–34; Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyra, "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analyzing Immersion," in *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on Digital Games Research*, edited by Suzanne De Castell and Jennifer Jenson (Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2007), 37–53, https://books.google.com/books/about/Worlds_in_Play.html?id=WykINIyYSb0C.

known as decoupling by cognitive scientists,[38] Lukka and other psychologists refer to it as a dissociative state. Under these views, an immersed player loses him or herself, breaking or dissociating with the player's primary identity. This dissociative state requires that the player "pay less and less attention to their actual self" and to "constantly ignor[e] elements that could break the immersion."[39] Lukka posits that although a player can have a measure of awareness of self and character, only one of these identities or perspectives can be active at a given moment due to the "natural limits of our attention."[40] Under this view, being conscious of the player is seen as a break in immersion itself and is undesirable, or even impossible, if this limitation of attention is expected. Immersion as a concept may, in fact, encourage a kind of solipsistic focus on individual experience that disincentivizes empathy beyond that between and the player and his/her character. The concept of immersion also seems to preclude the dual consciousness of player and character that is necessary to take into consideration other players and, thus, play empathetically.

The alibi of role-playing[41] sets up the imagined boundaries between the character and the player and is the basic premise that allows for the game to exist. Alibi is a part of the social contract of the game: the in- and out-of-game shared rules and beliefs that establish the parameters of play. Under the alibi of role-play, one agrees that it is not the player, but the character that is making choices, speaking, and taking actions that are relevant and plausible for the fiction. Within the diegetic reality, players are protected by the alibi of character and the social contract stipulates that actions taken in-game are acceptable. However, as the legalistic nature of the term connotes, an alibi can also be used as a cover or justification, something to establish innocence, deflect blame, or eliminate the possibility of culpability. The player becomes unaccountable for their actions because the player no longer "exists" in-game. Phrases such as "it wasn't me, it was my character" or "that's what my character would have done"[42] are used to justify behavior and, sometimes, to silence the concerns of other players. Alibi, by providing such an excuse, tends to actively encourage the relationship of the individual player with the interface, and to actively discourage considering the feelings and perspectives of others while playing.

The concept of bleed, or the occasional spillover of "real life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states"[43] from player to character and vice versa, also relies on this notion of alibi and the erection of mental boundaries that establish the character and player as distinct entities. In fact, Bowman posits a direct correlation between alibi and bleed, stating, "the stronger the alibi, the weaker the bleed."[44] This relationship indicates that player choices to make the character very different from the player's primary out-of-game identity strengthen the alibi and lessen the chance for spillover of emotions across the two.

Under this conception, it is also possible to role-play without experiencing bleed, to fully compartmentalize a character, and to play without awareness of impacts to the player. Although bleed as a concept relies on establishing and upholding a distinct character, by its very existence, bleed also acknowledges the player, who, at any moment, may be affected by the role-play. Bleed is seen as "largely an unconscious process" in which the player and the character again become merged, despite the use of constructs such as immersion and alibi to try to keep them separate. To use the psychological terms discussed above, bleed is the experience of affective empathy between player and character, resulting in emotional reciprocity or complementarity.[45]

Despite the notion of a hard alibi that separates player from character, role-play exists in the liminal space of being "not-you" as you take on the role and perspective of another, while simultaneously retaining an essential "you-ness" that informs how you embody that role through the decisions made in the game, and they are communicated, such as through speech, costuming, props, and tone. A

38. Andreas Lieberoth, "With Role-Playing in Mind—a Cognitive Account of Decoupled Reality, Identity and Experience," in *Role, Play, Art -- Collected Experiences of Role-Playing*, edited by Thorbiorn Fritzon and Tobias Wrigstad (Stockholm: Föreningen Knutpunkt, 2006), 67–84, http://jeepen.org/kpbook/.

39. Lukka, 2014, p. 86.

40. Lukka, 2014, p. 86, 88.

41. Markus Montola and Jussi Holopainen, "First Person Audience and Painful Role-playing," in *Immersive Gameplay*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc., 2012), 13-30.

42. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Bleed: The Spillover Between Player and Character," NordicLarp.org, March 2, 2015, http://nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. We will note here that not all affective empathy is synonymous with bleed in larp, as a player may experience affective empathy by feeling for another character, or for another player.

too-strict adherence to the notion of alibi dismisses this liminality as metagaming,[46] insisting that the reminder of the player's existence constitutes using outside information and perspectives available only to the player that should be unknown to the character as a way to influence the game. In some gaming communities, experiencing bleed, breaking immersion, or acknowledging alibi are considered bad role-play and punished either in-game or off-game, such as when a player who is experiencing bleed is shamed or ostracized.[47] Vehemently defending alibi as a carte-blanche for character actions can foster "Playing for Victory," which precludes empathetic play by ignoring or even encouraging behavior such as in-game bullying by individuals and cliques. In the best cases, the concepts of alibi, immersion, and bleed encourage an individual approach to gameplay in a larp, focused on a single player's goals and experiences. In the worst cases, relying on a strict separation of character from player can provide a cover for abusive behavior done in the name of play or characterization.

To play for empathy, one must broaden one's conception beyond the double consciousness of identity—the self of the player and the alterego of the character—and consider the simultaneity of existing in the diegetic and non-diegetic world in what scholars call bisociation.[48] Playing for Empathy requires revising the idea that one leaves behind the player upon crossing the magic circle of the game where one becomes the character, a different identity that may be one or more manifestations or versions of the player's ego.[49] Instead, one recognizes that a character is always already the player, and that even while taking on the persona of someone else, one never fully dissociates from the primary ego identity. A player is simultaneously the character and the primary self, co-existing and able to move between them, sometimes without a recognizable break in the immersion. Stenros and Montola recognize this bisociation when they articulate the role of "first-person audience" to which role-play gives a player access.[50] As both audience and participant, player and character, one is simultaneously observing the experience unfolding before them and participating in its creation. Arts educator and edu-larp researcher Jason Cox corroborates this dual consciousness; when a player "views the game both from the lens of their own eyes and those of the character's whose actions they dictate" the game fosters "both an interpersonal and intrapersonal experience."[51] The magic circle of the game does not remove the responsibility of the player to make choices that take into account the experience and feelings of others; the alibi of the game does not preclude Playing for Empathy.

We suggest instead that the player retains a bisociated state, one of continued awareness of the environment and the constructed nature of the game, while still being immersed in character. Lukka's notion that the immersed player has the ability to ignore incongruent aspects of reality—such as the modern bathroom at the medieval larp, or the existence of an organizer's medical kit in a fantasy realm—suggests that the presence of such a "larp filter" means that it is possible to maintain a bisociated state. The fact that the player can notice but choose to ignore these inconsistencies speaks to bisociation; the player can also notice and choose to act upon their observations; these actions taken by the player and not the character are not necessarily incongruous with role-playing or the state of immersion.

Steering and Playing for Empathy

The recent articulation of the concept of steering by Montola, Stenros, and Saitta helps to move beyond a binary conception of the player-character and serves as a strong lens to explain Playing for Empathy. Plainly, steering is "the practice of making in-character decisions based on off-game reasons."[52] In order to steer, one must recognize the continued existence and importance of the player and their choices, even while appropriately immersed in character. The idea of steering also does not relegate a retention of non-diegetic thoughts or traits to mere metagaming, a generally derogatory term used for someone who actively uses off-game skills or goals to

46. Shoshana Kessock, "Metagaming—When Is It Not Unfair?" Larping.org, July 31, 2013, http://www.larping.org/larp-articles/metagaming-not-unfair/.

47. Bowman, "Bleed," 2015.

48. Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Eleanor Saitta, "The Art of Steering—Bringing the Player and the Character Back Together," Nordiclarp.org, accessed July 2, 2015, http://nordiclarp.org/2015/04/29/the-art-of-steering-bringing-the-player-and-the-character-back-together/.

49. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2010).

50. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola, *Nordic Larp* (Fëa Livia, 2010), http://tampub.uta.fi/handle/10024/95123.

51. Jason Matthew Cox, "Role-Playing Games in Arts, Research and Education," *International Journal of Education through Art* 10, no. 3 (October 2014): 381–95.

52. Montola, Stenros, and Saitta, 2015.

gain in-game points, goals, or esteem.[53]

To recognize the existence of steering requires a change in the way the inherent double-consciousness of role-play is viewed by not privileging an idealized loss of self and wholesale adoption of a persona, as if the player's self is completely absent or subsumed. Recognizing that steering exists also requires a change in perspective about the social alibi of a game: if the character's actions are the result of player choices, which are made for diegetic and non-diegetic reasons, then the player retains a level of accountability for their rhetorical choices and the consequences.[54]

Although steering can take the form of any character behavior choices made for non-diegetic reasons, such as locating a bathroom or seeking out a particular player, one of the key ways steering can be used is to make a "non-diegetic decision on how to generate better play,"[55] including how to make the game better for others. This process may include noticing the playing ability of a novice participant and adjusting one's behavior accordingly, or the recognition that a particular choice would generate play for others, making for a more intense or involved collective game experience. This idea of changing one's behavior during play in order to engage another is not new to play theory. Erving Goffman clearly articulates that the concept of play often is not concerned with a hyper-competitiveness that leads to "winning" or dominating other players, but which demonstrates a type of steering behavior that is part of Playing for Empathy. Goffman states that during the playful act, "the stronger and more competent participant restrains himself sufficiently to be a match for the weaker and less competent."[56] Furthermore, Goffman notes that "frequent role switching occurs during play, resulting in a mixing up of the dominance order found among the players during occasions of literal activity."[57]

Thus, steering is fundamental to Playing for Empathy. By maintaining bisociation, a player can accept the alibi that makes role-play possible while simultaneously retaining the degree of distance from the immersive character experience that allows for active and dynamic rhetorical choices that affect play. Specifically, when one plays for empathy one, recognizes the perspective, skills, experiences, and opportunities of the other players and adjusts one's choices to steer toward a broader definition of win conditions and better play experiences for the group. As noted, this ability is not only part of the notion of play itself (Goffman), but also activates play on an intrapersonal as well as interpersonal level (Cox).

It's important to also distinguish how Playing for Empathy differs from the Nordic larp concept of playing to lose. Playing to lose is described as deliberately making choices within larp that will produce an outcome for an individual character that would generally be viewed as a failed win-condition, but which will "create better drama."[58] For example, character death is usually considered a losing condition, but a player may deliberately choose to cause their own character demise; such a choice affords them an opportunity to enact a dramatic scene where they can command the attention of the other players or experience that scenario in a safer, vicarious game space. Playing to lose can be used as a tool for playing for empathy; for example, a player's desire to have a losing outcome during play may create an opportunity to grant another player a "winning" outcome, either in the form of a traditional victory, or by adopting a more powerful or important role in the game's outcome. However, playing to lose is fundamentally a strategy for an individual player's experience, whereas Playing for Empathy requires the consideration of the individual's experience in relation to other player-characters. Playing to lose is driven by an individual player's desire to experience a losing outcome, not necessarily to create a winning outcome for another participant *who desires it*. Although playing to lose may be chosen by a participant because it makes sense for the character or would make a better story, playing to lose becomes the goal to pursue in the game, effectively becoming a type of win-condition. Imagine the frustration of two players in a zero-sum conflict who are both attempting to play to lose as their desired experience, but are unable to do so since neither will accept victory. While playing to lose can be a form of empathy for another player's desire to win, playing for empathy requires the player to consider if the other player actually desires to win, and make choices based on that consideration.

53. Kessock, 2013.

54. Maury E. Brown, "Pulling the Trigger on Player Agency: How Psychological Intrusions in Larps Affect Game Play," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014), 96–111.

55. Montola, Stenros and Saitta, 2014.

56. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, vol. ix (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), xxx.

57. Goffman, 1974, xxxx.

58. Nordic Larp Wiki, "Playing to Lose," Nordic Larp Wiki, accessed September 26, 2015, http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing_to_Lose.

Strategies to Play for Empathy

Although role-play in general increases the opportunities for empathy—at least at the level of the player to his/her character—gamers and game communities can also encourage certain play styles, design structures, and a community ethos that fosters empathy and the recognition of others. As advocated in the Dogma 99 Manifesto, both designers and participants can choose to "leav[e] behind overtly 'gamist style' designs, which create structures that, intentionally or not, allow for a larp to be won by some, and hence lost by others."[59] To play for empathy requires participants to evaluate certain fundamentals of game play, such as the language used, including body language and listening; goals as characters and as players; the options available in game by the game's design, rules, and mechanics and by the social norms and ideologies brought into the game; the way players view those with whom they interact, including other players and GMs, the choices made as a result of these views; and the communal gaming norms that are formed and enforced.

The following are some strategies individual players can use to play for empathy:

Player and Character Goals

Letting Go of Gamist Goals—Although gamist goals and competitive play can be an important part of role-playing games, they are not the sole component, nor even the driving force. When a larp is over, all character achievements do not transfer to the non-diegetic reality. Recognizing that the consequences of actions for your character are temporary can help free players to make choices that invite the risk of an unpredictable outcome, which may also empower others or benefit the game as a whole. In the Nordic larp community, this concept is often called playing to lose, a collaborative dramatist play style in which one invites or even seeks a negative consequence for one's character.[60]

Views on Others

Dual Consciousness Mindfulness—In addition to becoming a character and immersing in an imagined world, remaining conscious of one's status as a player affords the bisociation required to enact mindful steering. In the dual consciousness state, player-characters can consider how a given choice will affect the player, other players, other players' characters, and the overall gameplay experience. Even if those questions are difficult to answer, merely raising them enacts the bisociated state.

Imagine Others Complexly—Snap judgments of others—both as players and as characters—are often based on archetypal categories and implicit biases from within or outside the game. These are made quickly and generally without discernment, often during a stressful moment, such as the start of a larp. Pausing for reflection and considering that others have complicated motivations or circumstances help move our perceptions of others into a less reactive and more mindful state, which are conducive for empathetic play.

Player agency and choices

Betray Up—Many larps are designed with a significant intrigue component to drive the game's plot, typically coming to a climactic moment of betrayal. In games where power is distributed hierarchically, a PfE strategy is to choose to betray "up" the hierarchy rather than down to character's with less status.

Lend Your Voice to Support Another—A single supportive voice to someone else's idea can significantly help that person's voice be heard and their idea be given due consideration. The encouragement to continue, and the repetition to ensure that an idea is heard both support the other player positively. When this support comes from a player who possesses in- or out-of-game privilege, it changes the power dynamic and transfers the privilege to the previously marginalized player, empowering their voice and improving their agency.

Reinforce Non-Traditional Roles—Explicitly supporting someone who is in a leadership role that defies non-diegetic power dynamics can change the balance of power in a larp. Making it clear that your character firmly believes that the person in the authoritative role owns and deserves that authority can help overcome other players' often unexamined tendency to disbelieve a player enacting the role whose embodied appearance does not conform to their expectations of what that role would look like, e.g. a physically petite female battle leader. Note that this process can be done both in the presence of the character in the non-traditional role, and on the periphery, by taking supportive actions on behalf

59. Fatland and Wingård, X.

60. Nordic Larp Wiki, 2015.

of the player in the non-traditional role.

The following are some ways that larp communities can, through their norms and the social contract of their games, foster Playing for Empathy:

Recognize the lived experience of players—Each player comes to a larp with a unique background of skills and life experiences. Since larps are intense emotional experiences, many players—especially the estimated 90% of the population who have been exposed to a traumatic event and roughly 10% who have PTSD—need support before, during, and after play. Furthermore, the possibility exists of one or more players in a larp becoming triggered by elements in the diegetic or non-diegetic reality.[61]

A triggered player loses the ability to steer, as the trauma intrusion makes difficult or impossible the distance required to make such choices. While trauma triggers cannot be prevented—nor is that a goal of larp—communities should recognize the emotional power of the medium and be aware that characters are played by actual people with varied pasts and perspectives. That awareness in itself is a form of empathy that can then lead to making PfE choices.

Not all play is okay for all players. *Safe words* are a larp component that vary by community and allow players to halt or lessen game play that is too emotionally or physically rough. While many larp communities have in place procedures to maintain physical safety and allow for non-diegetic intervention to players experiencing bodily stress—such as heat exhaustion, stomachaches, or a twisted ankle—each larp group also needs to develop procedures and an ethos to support players whose game experience compromises their actual or perceived safety on an emotional level. Merely having techniques such as safe words available is not enough, however, as there are powerful incentives not to use them. Larp communities need to demonstrate that players have both the permission and agency to use safety techniques that arise from a sense of empathy for others.

Finally, here are some ways that game designers can foster playing for empathy with their designs:

- **Defining the Play Ethos:** Game designers and storytellers can add descriptions of the play ethos to their design docs, player's guides, and other communication materials, making known the kind of play that they encourage and discourage.
- **Monitoring Emergent Play:** During play, organizers can encourage the collective experience and discourage power tactics being used by dominant players for in-game incentives.
- **Casting Decisions:** GMs can cast players in key roles to direct Playing for Empathy toward other players, fostering the emotional contagion of active empathy.
- **Manage the Transitions:** Prior to game-start, short workshops that demonstrate some of the above strategies or delineate a norm of other-directed play can be held. After game-wrap, organizers can host debriefs that allow unresolved tensions that may bleed from the characters to the players to be addressed.
- **Mechanics:** Game rules for conflict resolution can be designed to not specifically favor violence as the solution, but instead reward outcomes achieved through collaboration or compromise. Mechanics can encourage players to consider other characters as allies or team members, rather than enemies to be removed from play or corpses to loot.

Conclusion

Larp presents an opportunity for significantly profound experiences to be co-created for its participants. Because of the depth of these experiences, it becomes necessary to critically examine the kinds of game play that we create for each other. In both a game's design and a player's choices during gameplay, the opportunity exists to take accountability for design and play that reward callousness and self-interest at the expense of others, and how this ethos may contribute to a culture that is itself callous and self-interested. However, since larp is a co-creation of its participants, individuals are afforded the choice to engage in a style of play that encourages the positive effects of steering for the improved enjoyment of others. Playing for Empathy enacts interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, and can be reinforced through individual behavior, community ethos, and game design.

Playing for Empathy is a style of play that is possible given larp's ability to foster cognitive and affective empathy, as well as the active empathy resulting from emotional reciprocity or complementarity. Players who steer for empathy see and feel from another's perspective and take meaningful action within the game to help create individual and collective positive experiences. In so doing, they enact the empathy-altruism hypothesis

61. Brown, 2014.

that "if we feel empathy towards a person, we are likely to help them (in proportion to the empathy felt) without any selfish thoughts."[62] This process circumvents the kind of social-exchange theory of only choosing to help another if the rewards of helping outweigh the costs. It is possible to prime players to play for empathy by making deliberate changes to larp design, community ethos, and player choices in order to change game experiences to be positive and empowering for all players.

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62. Batson, et.al., 1991, 413.

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Trickster Remembers: Negotiating Morality and Identity in Tabletop Gaming Through Trickster Mythology

Janelle Davis

Abstract

In the late nineteenth century, both the United States and Canada established a practice of removing indigenous children from their homes and families and enrolling them in boarding schools intended to train them in dominant White culture. Massive harms were perpetrated by the schools through abuse, neglect, and wrongful deaths. Despite the efforts of indigenous creative and scholarly writers, this troubling history continues to receive little attention in public education, perpetuating the experience of marginalization and silence among indigenous youth.

The *Trickster Remembers* project seeks to address this dilemma by bringing a more nuanced version of the boarding school experience to the primarily White community of tabletop gamers through creation of a tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG). Drawing from fiction and autobiography describing the boarding school experience, as well as culturally specific story collections, all produced by indigenous writers, *Trickster Remembers* is a praxis experiment: a cultural intervention through the creation of a cultural object or phenomena founded in critical theory.

This paper analyzes the effectiveness of *Trickster Remembers*—designed, tested, and analyzed by the author—as an intervention tool aimed at fostering understanding and empathy. First, the author presents the intersections of narrative, performance, and game studies theories that form its critical foundations. Next, a description of the game and its design process is offered. The third section analyzes the game's effectiveness in fulfilling its goals using excerpts from actual play during two separate playtest sessions. The final section provides a critical reflection on the project's limitations and ethical ramifications, as well as possible theoretical implications.

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, both the United States and Canada established a practice of removing indigenous children from their homes and families and enrolling them in boarding schools intended to train them in dominant White culture. This mission was summed up by U.S. boarding school founder Richard Henry Pratt when he famously said their aim was to "kill the Indian to save the man."[1] In Canada, the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs expressed a similar desire to eradicate native cultures: "Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian Question and no Indian Department."[2] White narratives around the history of such schools, called Indian Boarding Schools in the United States and Residential Schools in Canada, describe them in terms of Manifest Destiny and the ongoing project of introducing White culture and civilization to indigenous peoples that were classified as hopeless savages. Much of the challenge to this narrative has come in the form of writings, which outline the massive harms perpetrated by the schools through abuse, neglect, and wrongful deaths. These challenges often accompany efforts to achieve reparations for these tragedies.[3] Yet, despite the efforts of indigenous creative and scholarly writers, this troubling history continues to receive little attention in public education, perpetuating the experience of marginalization and silence among indigenous youth.[4]

The *Trickster Remembers* project seeks to address this dilemma by bringing a more nuanced version of the boarding school experience to the primarily White community of tabletop gamers through creation of a tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG).

1. Laurence M. Hauptman, "Afterword," in *Pipestone: My Life in an Indian Boarding School*, by Adam Fortunate Eagle (Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 175.

2. Aboriginal Healing Foundation, "The Healing Has Begun: An Operational Update from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation" (Ottawa, ON, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002), 3. http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/the-healing-has-begun.pdf.

3. Ibid; Andrea Smith, "Soul Wound: The Legacy of Native American Schools," *Amnesty International Magazine,* amnestyusa.org, March 26 2007, http://www.amnestyusa.org/node/87342.

4. Deborah A. Miranda, "Lying to Children About the California Missions and the Indian," *Indian Country Today Media Network*, accessed June 1, 2015. http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/04/07/lying-children-about-california-missions-and-indian-159914.

Drawing from fiction[5] and autobiography[6] describing the boarding school experience, as well as culturally specific story collections,[7] all produced by indigenous writers, *Trickster Remembers* is a praxis experiment under the secondary definition of praxis outlined by Peter F. Murphy. Murphy describes this approach to praxis as a moment when scholarly activity moves from critical reflection into cultural intervention through the creation of cultural objects or phenomena founded in critical theory.[8] This paper represents the critical post-deployment reflection of *Trickster Remembers*, designed and investigated by the author using participant-observation during playtest sessions.

This paper analyzes the effectiveness of *Trickster Remembers*—designed, tested, and analyzed by the author—as an intervention tool aimed at fostering understanding and empathy. First, the author will present the intersections of narrative, performance, and game studies theories that form its critical foundations. Next, a description of the game and its design process will be offered. The third section will analyze the game's effectiveness in fulfilling its goals using excerpts from actual play during two separate playtest sessions. The final section will provide a critical reflection on the project's limitations and ethical ramifications, as well as possible theoretical implications.

Theory

Narrative Theory

In establishing the grounds for his narrative paradigm, Walter Fisher proposed that humans are fundamentally storytelling beings, socialized from the very beginnings of our lives into an understanding of the structure and purpose of stories.[9] Because we turn to stories before formal logic or argumentation to justify our beliefs or courses of action,[10] narrative is powerfully persuasive. Political scientist Eric Selbin notes that governments deploy narrative through their construction of a shared understanding of the past which serves to justify their right to hold power,[11] a tendency visible in American Thanksgiving mythology about equitable cultural exchange between European settlers and Native Americans; the necessary first step in resisting these power narratives, then, becomes the moment in which government-supported collective memory is challenged.[12]

Yet challenging dominant memories of history is insufficient. Fisher's understanding of humans as storytelling animals has its dark side; certainly, the example of commodity racism proffered by Stuart Hall in his examination of the process of racializing the African Other during Britain's early imperialism[13] demonstrates that the human proclivity toward stories, and our concomitant tendency to be persuaded by them, permits us to engage in dangerous shorthand through bypassing the part of our brains trained in more formal logic. Because we test stories against our own experiences and existing beliefs,[14] we are more likely to believe stories that accord with our own preconceived notions. Moreover, what is important here is not any one image or story, but the collection of ways in which difference is represented, which Hall refers to as a *regime of representation*.[15] This becomes important in large part because of the manner in which difference is presented, which Hall notes is frequently done through the use of polarized binary extremes, including such pairs as "civilized/primitive" and "repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic."[16] In this way, when we primarily learn about Otherness through the spectacles that Hall describes, we learn only about a constructed

5. Tomson Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008); Richard Wagamese, *Indian Horse* (Madeira, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012).

6. Adam Fortunate Eagle, *Pipestone: My Life in an Indian Boarding School* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010); Basil H. Johnston, *Indian School Days* (Toronto, ON: Key Porter Books, 1988); K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

7. Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995); Mourning Dove, *Coyote Stories* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Beverly Hungry Wolf, *The Ways of My Grandmothers* (New York: Murrow, 1980).

8. Peter F. Murphy, "Cultural Studies as Praxis: A Working Paper," *College Literature* 19, no. 2 (1992): 32.

9. Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 65.

10. Ibid., 107.

11. Eric Selbin, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story* (New York: Zed Books, 2010), 61.

12. Ibid.

13. Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, edited by Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 332-333.

14. Fisher, *Human Communication*, 105.

15. Hall, "Spectacle of the Other," 328.

16. Hall, "Spectacle of the Other," 326.

and, in many cases, distorted version of the underlying lived experience of the Other in question.

Andrea Smith draws attention to the ways White people have engaged with Native peoples and cultures by asking: is this very action possible without engaging in cultural or spiritual appropriation, and can it happen without tapping into the assumption that Native peoples are somehow incapable of representing themselves?[17] Denzin and Lincoln call for nonindigenous scholars to engage with indigeneity in a way that is "ethical, performative, healing, transformative, decolonizing, and participatory."[18] Because this project engages with indigeneity from the perspective of a White scholar, the final section of this paper will be devoted to addressing questions of ethics and appropriation in the use of Native stories as a foundation for politically-motivated gaming interventions.

Performance Theory

In answering Denzin and Lincoln's call for ethical engagement with indigeneity, then, it is essential to establish role-playing games' potential for a participatory, decolonizing, potentially transformative, or healing performance endeavor. Daniel Mackay establishes that role-playing games approach performance by casting players and referee(s) as both performer and audience by turns, disrupting the traditional performer-audience dichotomy by substituting a continuum of roles wherein the role-player becomes performer-audience rather than only one or the other.[19] Jaakko Stenros describes this phenomenon in terms of dual consciousness, wherein the player is able to hold a simultaneous awareness that the act of portraying a character in a role-playing game is both real—in the context of the fictional created world—and not-real, because it is an act of play.[20]

This blurring of the line between performer and audience calls to mind the spect-actor of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre. A revolutionary form of theatrical work originating in Boal's work with Brazilian peasants and workers, Forum Theatre highlights experiences of oppression and avenues for social change by allowing the audience to interrupt the action of a troubling scene in order to physically replace the protagonist role so that they may improvise their own performances intervening in the central conflict.[21] The purpose of this activity is not to achieve a perfect solution to the presented conflict, but to explore and examine ways of intervening as a means of improving spect-actors' understanding of their own desires for change and potential barriers to those efforts, providing a space to practice behavior that may prove liberatory.[22] Similarly to the gamemaster of a role-playing game, Forum Theatre makes use of a neutral facilitator—the joker—who provides the spect-actors a summary of available options, provokes them toward action, and speaks to consequences as the spect-actors' choices play themselves out.[23] Moreover, as the original scene—the "anti-model"—demonstrating this dilemma is most commonly scripted from an amalgamation of the personal experiences of the actors animating it, and the goal of these scenes is to invoke a visceral emotional reaction spurring intervention from the audience, Forum Theatre bears a significant resemblance to the Nordic larp concept of *bleed games*, designed to induce strong emotional responses in players through the experience of play.[24]

It is clear, then, that tabletop role-playing games are a form of performance, one which has more in common with liberatory performance practices than traditional theatrical productions. Yet while the form of performance in role-playing games aligns itself more with Boal's work than that of Shakespeare or Mamet, the *content* is not always so revolutionary, especially given the trend toward "defaultism," where games and their players assume that the default experience

17. Andrea Smith, "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing," in *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*, ed. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 68.

18. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, eds. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 2.

19. Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performance Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 58.

20. Jaakko Stenros, "Aesthetics of Action," *Jaakko Stenros*, October 28, 2013, http://jaakkostenros.wordpress.com/2013/10/28/aesthetics-of-action/. Text of a talk given at Alibis for Interaction conference in Landskrona, Sweden.

21. Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz, "Introduction," in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*, edited by Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruze (London: Routledge, 1993), 2-3.

22. Kate H. Brown and Diane Gillespie, "Responding to Moral Distress in the University," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 31, no. 5 (1999), 39.

23. Chris Johnston, *House of Games: Making Theatre from Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 60.

24. Markus Montola and Jussi Holopainen, "First Person Audience and the Art of Painful Role-Playing," in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White, 13-32 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 15-16.

is White.[25] For role-playing games to enter into the sphere of critical performance scholarship, they must do more than provide fun and catharsis; they "must be political, moving people to action, reflection, or both."[26] Performance in particular offers a unique space for individuals to engage with action and reflection because its position, set aside from everyday behaviors, renders it a liminal space.[27] Johan Huizinga also establishes play, like sacred ritual, as an activity set apart from the ordinary, in which belief and unbelief are folded into each other.[28] Role-playing games in particular are especially rich environments for this sort of behavior because they are explicitly betwixt and between ordinary and fantasy life; as players move between their quotidian person-selves through the player-self and into the character-self, there is a heightened awareness of the fluidity of the self and it becomes necessary to establish symbolic borders between these multiple facets of one's identity.[29] Because of this fluidity and the conscious creation of boundaries, role-playing provides an opportunity for players to engage in Conquergood's dialogic performance, where the self is opened to stretching its own boundaries through engagement with the Other.[30]

Moreover, the process of creating and bringing to life a character in a role-playing game requires players to assemble their characters out of tropes drawn from their own experiences and memories, which MacKay terms fictive blocks.[31] Just as a performer draws on his or her repertoire of potential behaviors in rehearsal to breathe life into a character on stage, role-players imaginatively bring together disparate pieces of their own personal experiences and media consumption, deploying their sense of narrative coherence to assemble these individual tropes into stories for their characters before and during the act of play.[32] The difficulty with this use of fictive blocks comes when players attempt to portray Otherness; if, as Hall establishes, our encounters with difference primarily come through binary spectacles, how can we sensitively animate characters without resorting to media-fed stereotypes? This paper offers no simplistic answers to this pressing question, but does continue wrestling with it through the analysis of the attempt in actual play.

Role-Playing Theory

Much as the more traditional performance arts recognize that performers temporarily submerge their ordinary identities within adopted personae, the study of role-playing recognizes the process of immersion, by which the player transitions from their quotidian self into another, separate identity.[33] It is the process of immersion that endows role-playing with its potential for increasing player empathy, by enabling players to practice stepping into the mind of another.[34] Balzer proposes that this immersive quality is most fundamental to the educational potential of role-playing, as it encourages players to actively adjust their interpretation of experiences to align with the conventions of the gameworld.[35] Though Balzer's claim relies in many ways on the specifically embodied nature of live action role-play (larp), research into similar qualities of tabletop and virtual space role-playing[36] suggests that immersion does not depend solely on this embodied quality.

What is essential, however, in addition to the actual immersion of player-self into character-self and from quotidian reality into game reality, is the additional process of connecting game experience to life experience. Thomas and Brown describe this process as one of recognition, reflection, and

25. Whitney Strix Beltrán, "Why Minority Settings in RPGs Matter." Tor.com. April 27 2015.

26. Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), xi.

27. D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 158-159.

28. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), 24.

29. Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing," *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 344.

30. Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 167.

31. MacKay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 77.

32. Ibid., 80.

33. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-Playing Games," in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 35.

34. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 8.

35. Myriel Balzer, "Immersion as a Prerequisite of the Didactical Potential of Role-Playing," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 2 (2011): 41.

36. David W. Simkins and Constance Steinkuehler, "Critical Ethical Reasoning and Role-Play," *Games and Culture* 3, no. 3-4 (2008): 333-355; Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, "Play of Imagination: Extending the Literary Mind," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2007): 149-172; Todd Nicholas Fuist, "The Agentic Imagination: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as a Cultural Tool" in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2012), 108-126.

incorporation;[37] Fuist calls it *imagining out,* as opposed to *imagining in* to the character or game.[38] Bowman turns to Jungian theory to explain this psychological activity as individuation, in which the individual must productively navigate the return from a liminal state.[39] By reflection and incorporation, imagining out, or psychological integration, players are able to take the experience of adopting and engaging with an alternate persona, and the ethical struggles of a game, back into their experiences, beliefs, and behaviors as they return to their quotidian realities from the imaginative game space. Moreover, as Waskul and Lust describe above, the act of inhabiting another persona and the need to draw lines between the self and the persona pushes the player into a meta-cognitive state, a process Sanne Harder refers to as "aesthetic doubling."[40] This process not only encourages immersion into the character-persona, but also an awareness of the ways in which the self and the persona differ.

Although much of this section has centered on identity alteration via immersion, the role of ethical reasoning in games should not be overlooked. Thomas and Brown engage this in a general sense when they advance their argument that imaginative play and multi-dimensional experience enable critical creative thinking skills.[41] Simkins and Steinkuehler examine gameplay ethics more directly in their analysis of ethical reasoning in massively multiplayer online games, coming to the conclusion that in order to productively engage in ethical decision making via the gameworld, a game must provide four things to players: a chance to effect meaningful change in the world, a response from the game world that indicates the player character's relationship to the world itself, a social context in which actions are embedded, and a sense that multiple meaningful options are available to players.[42] When all four categories are present in a game, that game provides players with sufficient context and scope to engage critically with the ethical ramifications of their choices and develop critical ethical reasoning.[43]

Game Design

In *Trickster Remembers*, players portray children newly arrived at the fictional Chisholm Industrial School, between the ages of seven and fourteen, primarily of Ojibway, northern Sioux, Blackfoot, or mixed race backgrounds. As the primary referee, the Headmaster (HM) provides rules adjudication and narration pertaining to the environment, story, and non-player characters (NPCs); a secondary referee, the Trickster, uses visions and mechanical intervention—raising or lowering target numbers, granting bonuses to die rolls, and minor changes to the resources of player characters—to highlight the experience of culture clash and disorientation for players. In playtesting, because a specific single-session scenario was used, the Trickster also foreshadowed the culminating conflict of the story arc. To highlight the game's goal of critical reflection, the ultimate conflict is a moral, rather than physical, confrontation. During a Minnesota blizzard, three NPC students flee the school; players must decide whether to pursue their fellow students and, should they do so, whether to accompany, assist, or persuade them to return to the school.

To ensure accessibility for inexperienced gamers, this game was built using the Fate Accelerated Edition (FAE) open-source ruleset. FAE is a simple, straightforward system, in which characters are primarily described through sets of Aspects, Approaches, and Stunts. Only Approaches use numeric abstraction to describe the character's abilities, and they are structured to be very broad; for example, a character who is very Forceful might be stubborn, or physically strong, or simply very determined. More central to character creation is the use of Aspects, which describe a character in terms of their most essential personality traits, relationships, beliefs, or possessions.[44] Pre-generated characters provided to the players included Aspects such as "My Mother Told Me a Story About That," "Leave No One to Suffer Alone," and "The Other Boys Look Up

37. Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, "Play of Imagination: Extending the Literary Mind," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2007): 168.

38. Todd Nicholas Fuist, "The Agentic Imagination: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as a Cultural Tool" in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2012), 118.

39. Bowman, "Jungian Theory," 38.

40. Sanne Harder, "Confessions of a Schoolteacher: Experiences with Role-playing in Education," in *Lifelike*, edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Grade, and Line Thorup (Copenhagen, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP07), 231.

41. Thomas and Brown, "Play of Imagination," 169.

42. Simkins and Steinkeuhler, "Critical Ethical Reasoning," 346-347.

43. Ibid., 352.

44. Fate Accelerated, "Who Do You Want To Be?" *Fate: Role-playing Games SRD*, accessed Dec. 6, 2015. http://fate-srd.com/fate-accelerated/who-do-you-want-be.

to Me." The use of descriptive Aspects over numeric abstractions emphasized the characters as real (or potentially real) individuals existing in relation to the world. Portraying characters described in this way encouraged players to approach problems through the lens of the character's mode of being in the world. In game terms, an Aspect can be invoked through the expenditure of a limited resource called a Fate Point; unlocking an Aspect allows the player to add to their own die roll, subtract from an enemy's, reroll their dice, or grant a bonus to an allied character. The flip side of Aspects is that they can also be compelled; in a situation where an Aspect might apply negatively—as with the pre-generated practical jokester character's Aspect "It Was Too Funny Not To"—the gamemaster may use the Aspect to visit penalties upon the character. This use of Aspects restores a Fate Point to the affected character.

The most significant way in which *Trickster Remembers* departs from the core FAE rules is in the addition of the Trickster as a secondary referee. While the Headmaster fulfills many of the core functions of a traditional gamemaster, the Trickster's task is to interrupt the game's narrative and characters' lives. Unlike *How We Came to Live Here*, a game with a similar focus on Native history/mythology and dual Storytellers,[45] the Headmaster and Trickster have conflicting agendas; the Headmaster's goal is to move the story forward while the Trickster's is to take it sideways. At his or her discretion, the Trickster can intervene in a scene to impose a vision on a particular character. "Vision" in this case is not meant to be taken literally; visions from the playtests made use of multiple senses, including smell, taste, and sound, as well as sight. As a consequence of the experience, meant to reconnect the characters to their traditional heritages, the Trickster also gives the character two temporary Aspects: one positive and one negative. The Trickster may also alter the results or difficulties of dice rolls made by the player-characters to the player's benefit or detriment according to the Trickster's agenda.

The Game in Action

The game was tested on two separate occasions, with a total of seven players and two different Tricksters. As researcher and developer, I ran both games as the HM; there was no overlap between games except for the HM. Both Tricksters were male and White; two players were female; one was of Native/Chicano heritage. Participants ranged in age from late twenties to early forties and were predominantly White. Each session was followed by a semi-structured discussion in which players were able to reflect on the game experience and offer critical feedback to the game developer. Eleven hours of gameplay and discussion were recorded. Through performing these characters, players engaged with unfamiliar identities and moral experimentation; the next sections detail this process as well as providing an analysis on the disruptive role of the Trickster.

Playing at Identity

In both playtests, players actively facilitated immersion, demonstrating engagement and investment in their characters. Immersion was maintained in part by policing character portrayals; because their characters were significantly different from themselves in age, race, and historical context, staying "in character" across these identity and experience gaps was complex. When one player "broke character," fellow players would point out the lapse and the offending player would acknowledge their failure and intensify efforts to maintain the identity. This process included, "being way more dismissive than these kids would have been," as one player put it, as well as working toward age-appropriate expectations for younger characters.

Players made extensive use of their descriptive Aspects to maintain connection to their characters and strengthen portrayals, justifying behavior by referencing their character sheets. This process created dilemmas for both female players, who separately portrayed a pre-constructed character with the Aspect "Leave no one to suffer alone"; in keeping with this Aspect, these players drove many interactions with NPC students in an effort to protect and support them. One player risked punishment for leaving her bed in the night in order to sit next to two young NPCs and tell them stories until they fell asleep.

Significantly, as players grew more comfortable with the characters they portrayed, they also began to perceive the imposition of White culture on their adopted identities as an assault, rejecting or resisting the religious and cultural norms established by the NPC boarding school staff, including modesty

45. The Black Coyotl, "RPG Review—How We Came to Live Here," Theblackcoyote.com, August 13, 2014. http://theblackcoyote.com/2014/08/13/rpg-review-how-we-came-to-live-here/; Guyintheblackhat, "Hopi Hopes and Navajo Nightmares: How We Came to Live Here," *Geek Buffet*, August 6, 2010, https://geekbuffet.wordpress.com/tag/how-we-came-to-live-here/; Ohbejuan, "Review of How We Came to Live Here," Rpg.net, October 25, 2010, http://www.rpg.net/reviews/archive/14/14974.phtml. At the time of writing, the text of *How We Came to Live Here* was unavailable; recourse to game reviews was necessary.

teachings, wearing shoes at all times, and speaking only English. Female players, in particular, actively rejected the gendered expectations that were projected upon them in regards to dress and behavior; although they adhered to these expectations to protect themselves from in-game reprisals, they regularly criticized them. A favorite tactic of several players, both male and female, was to ask naïve questions of the staff, ostensibly to understand what they were being told, but functioning as a means of pushing the staff into a position where they had to fall back on authoritarian explanations for their religious teachings.

> **NPC:** Because women are inherently sinful, it is important that we be demure.
>
> **Bea:** What is a sin?
>
> **NPC:** Sin is dishonor in the eyes of God. Sin is going out uncovered … All of these are things that you will learn.
>
> **M [Bea's player]:** So she has no problem with wearing clothes, but 'cause the rules don't make sense, she's just not getting it.
>
> **NPC:** You will continue to get further instruction in Bible classes from Father Lindquist.
>
> **M:** She's going to be kind of resigned about this, and even a little angry towards the ignorance of this woman.

One player, on multiple occasions, described stories that her character told to NPC students to encourage and amuse them. Lacking a complete lexicon of stories appropriate to her character's Ojibway heritage, she drew on her own existing knowledge to describe plausible, if potentially tribally inaccurate or inappropriate, stories. In this case, the player demonstrated Mackay's concept of fictive blocks and upheld the working hypothesis that this game would encourage players to draw connections between their own experiences/knowledge and the projected knowledge and experiences of the characters they portrayed.

These exchanges illustrate the experiences that players bring to the table and which inform their portrayals of characters. Though no player had personal experience that was contiguous with the experiences that their characters were undergoing, they drew on analogous personal histories in order to inform their performances of their characters' reactions.

Performing Morality

One of the goals informing the choice to use role-playing games as a vehicle for engaging social issues was to draw on the cooperative nature of tabletop role-playing games in order to underscore the necessity of mutual support for survival in the boarding school experience. In both playtests, upon seeing that one of the NPC students was being punished through the withholding of food, players endeavored to hide some of their own food in order to support their fellow students, persisting in the face of lectures from NPC staff at their respective tables. This is particularly noteworthy because there was no instrumental reason for players to make these attempts; the NPCs they assisted or attempted to assist offered no rewards or reciprocal assistance. Assisting NPC students, at risk to themselves, was an activity driven by *character* rather than *player* concerns, specifically the recognition of shared circumstance and the expression of empathy.

This collectivist moral imperative surfaced again when players in the first playtest decided with some reluctance—spurred by a PC with the Aspect "Leave no one to suffer alone"—to release another student from confinement. Through their characters' discussion, players expressed awareness that they faced potentially serious reprisals from NPC school staff, and were attached enough to these characters after only an hour or two of play to seek to protect them from such punishments.

One example of this investment, and a moment of moral complexity, arose in one player's portrayal of a character whose primary personality trait was a love of practical jokes. This player described several jokes that he attempted to play on other students, and on two separate occasions was locked in a metal box as punishment; after the second such punishment, he was also brought up to the front of the cafeteria space to provide a public apology to his teachers and fellow students. Over the course of play, as his character experienced more severe punishments, the player's demeanor began to grow more serious and withdrawn; in the post-game debrief, he spoke of how he realized that the people who deserved to have tricks played on them were untouchable, while the only people he could reach with his jokes were facing the same struggles with which his character was trying to cope.

> **G:** There really wasn't much of a chance to prank the teachers. The only people who I had much of a chance to affect were the people who were already suffering. I was like, well how much of an asshole do I want to be today. […]

T: I saw him just do this [makes despondent face] bluhhhh…

G: It was like, I wanted to have fun, but I looked around and I was like, who deserves it, and none of the people I could reach deserved it, so…

T: So you picked on the dumb clumsy kid…

G: The clumsy kid was the most convenient scapegoat and the snooty girl, she actually did sort of deserve it.

T: To be complicit with the oppressor, that's a big crime. That'll get you shivved in the yard.

The player internalized the lectures on proper behavior that his character received from the NPC school staff and began to feel and express remorse for actions taken in the purely imaginative world of the game. Just as interestingly, the players agreed that the most hated NPC in the game, above even the teachers who visited punishments upon them, was a girl who curried favor with the teachers; she was referenced throughout the session and debrief as "the snooty girl." In the excerpt above, T—who actually portrayed the Trickster in this playtest—draws attention to the underlying reason for their dislike of her: the fact that this NPC supported the adults who the players agreed were the oppressors.

Deploying the Trickster

One advantage that characters had in this game is the intervention of the Trickster figure. Trickster often appears as a teller of tales or a revealer of truths despite—or perhaps because of—his facility with lies. The Trickster is, as Hyde says, "the archetype who attacks all archetypes. He is the character in myth who threatens to take the myth apart."[46] Trickster's shamelessness also creates opportunities; the things Trickster says or does that violate social norms can open up space for upheaval of the existing order.[47]

The responsibility of this role is significant. It requires that the person portraying the Trickster have a lexicon ready for deployment because the Trickster draws on stories and images to create visions interrupting the characters' and players' conceptions of the world. The two individuals who played Trickster for the playtest sessions provide very different examples of how this might proceed and, as such, illustrate the significance of Trickster's potential effect on the game.

The first Trickster lacked a large lexicon of relevant stories —in essence, his repertoire of fictive blocks available for deployment was limited—and so leaned heavily on mechanical intervention, changing the difficulties of dice rolls to make player actions more or less likely to succeed. His effect on the game came through what he enabled the players to do. These interventions also included increasing the efficacy of improvised tools—enabling the "prison break" described in the previous section—and granting characters insight into the motivations of the school staff.

By contrast, the second Trickster had a broader repertoire of stories, but less comfort with the game mechanics; his interactions with players were largely atmospheric rather than instrumental. He introduced mysteries; one player found himself unexpectedly paying a great deal of attention to his reading lessons because he wanted to be able to read a word carved in the frame of the box where he had been locked away for punishment. This Trickster's stories led players to forge a connection between their characters' experiences in the school and their more traditional backgrounds.

It is perhaps Trickster's influence that had the most effect on player decisions in the final conflict of the game. In the first playtest, the PCs were able to persuade two of the three NPC students to return with them to the school, reasoning that they would be able to support and assist the other children by staying, and that this would be more productive than flight. Buoyed by the first Trickster's mechanical interventions, these players felt that they had the ability to exert their own influences on the world around them. By contrast, two of the players in the second session accompanied all three of the fleeing NPCs away from the school. Only one returned to the school; the other two had decided that they were unable to make enough of a difference there to justify enduring further struggle under the White staff and chose to risk the blizzard to escape. For these characters, Trickster had not increased their ability to affect the world, but he had strengthened their connection to home.

The juxtaposition of these two very different results from the same basic game demonstrates the malleability of role-playing games through the ways that different groups adapt similar premises and events via the catalyst of performance. Just as there is no one definitive boarding school story emerging from the fiction and memoirs that informed its creation, the game produces no one narrative from its implementation; rather, an array of possible narratives emerge from the intersection of the game world and the experiences and repertoires that players, Headmaster, and Trickster bring to the table.

46. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 14.

47. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 157.

Conclusion: Limitations, Ethics, and Implications

Yet for all its encouraging outcomes, some aspects of the game remain troubling. While its goal was to introduce players to the Other through the adoption of unfamiliar personae, the very lack of familiarity that the game was intended to address represents a significant shortcoming. Because the players themselves lacked any significant knowledge of the cultural backgrounds of their characters, the fictive blocks available to them for engaging with their characters were limited to vaguely analogous personal history or unrelated fiction and media narratives. The very fluidity that makes engagement with the characters possible and productive also means that players are already unmoored from their everyday experiences and may cling to the familiar or known, inadvertently resorting to stereotyping in order to maintain a sense of psychic stability rather than taking the risk of appearing wrong or asking clarifying questions.

One of the aspects particular to these sessions that may have helped avert that specific pitfall is that most players in both groups had significant experience role-playing together. This shared history contributed to the creation of a play-space that was both liminal and comfortable for participants, suggesting that they would be more willing to take risks. Groups with a shorter history or a less supportive interpersonal dynamic may face more difficulties in engaging with this discomfiting subject matter. To address this concern, future iterations of the game will include primers on the geographically proximate Native tribes, including culture, myths, and their history of interaction with White settlers for use in creation of original characters. Pre-generated characters will include a longer version of the existing single-paragraph summary of their personal histories, including brief versions of one or two traditional stories that might have proved influential in their pre-boarding-school lives. It is my hope as a designer that providing this information alongside the existing suggested reading list may encourage players to investigate Native cultures from the perspectives of Native individuals rather than through White popular history or media portrayals.

But because role-playing games undergo permutation with each group that interacts with them, it becomes difficult for any creator to predict whether groups will engage with them under the performative practices of "love, hope, care, and compassion" that Denzin and Lincoln call for in research touching upon indigenous populations.[48] While the central role of the Trickster and the explicit incorporation of traditional history and myth rejects the mainstream amnesia in this area,[49] a lack of player or GM knowledge risks trivialization and misrepresentation. More and more nuanced cultural background materials, as well as the game's emphasis on non-combat-based conflict resolution and performance over dice, may mitigate this potential by drawing players away from the popular portrayal of Native peoples as mystics or stoic warriors, but can never eliminate it. Similar games that have drawn on Native and First Nations stories and myth have faced criticism from concerned individuals and communities for their lack of input from the tribes and communities on whose cultures they draw. For example, *Ganakagok*, a game drawing on Inuit myth and art for its setting in a mythic ice-bound past, was criticized for its apparent cultural appropriation, a fact which designer William J. White discussed openly on the Story Games forum.[50] Similarly, Brennan Taylor's *How We Came to Live Here*, which draws on myths and traditions from Southwest Native American tribes, has been withdrawn from circulation to undergo review with Native consultants under similar concerns of cultural appropriation.[51] As an analogous game developed by a White designer from stories, myths, and accounts written by indigenous persons, *Trickster Remembers* potentially faces the same issues. Moreover, the choice to set this game in a (fictional) historical boarding school runs the risk of perpetuating the relegation of Native peoples to a mythologized past.

Yet players' willingness to engage with the material, their commitment to sincere attempts to portray their characters with as much sensitivity to the underlying historical context as they were capable of, and the degree of reflection that came forward during post-game debriefing suggest that the endeavor may not be wholly without merit. William J. White, game studies scholar and creator of *Ganakagok*, wrote in his analysis of masculine trajectories in play that it is possible for role-playing games, as a form of participatory culture, to create a space where players' understandings might begin to change—if role-playing was undertaken thoughtfully, including space for reflection as well

48. Denzin and Lincoln, "Introduction," 7.

49. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "History, Myth, and Identity in the New Indian Story," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, eds. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2008), 330.

50. William J. White, "Ganakagok, Cultural Appropriation, and the New World," *Story Games*, May 2012. http://www.story-games.com/forums/discussion/16475/ganakagok-cultural-appropriation-and-the-new-world

51. Brennan Taylor, "How We Came to Live Here," *Galileo Games*, accessed December 6, 2015. http://brennan-taylor.squarespace.com/how-we-came-to-live-here/

as experience.[52] It seems possible that although the game's limitations meant its ability to increase player understanding of Native cultures was sadly limited, it did provide insights for players into the dominant White culture that produced the boarding school experience. As Kaisa Kangas proposes, role-playing as a form of experimental anthropology may be more useful at granting insights into our own culture than into others' lived experience.[53]

Ultimately, this game holds both potential and danger. It depends on the willingness of players and gamemasters to come to the table with respect and honesty, and on their ability to create and inhabit a liminal space where performance can bring characters and world to life. The specific playtest sessions provide illustrations of positive outcomes in which players, GM, and Trickster actively navigate their shifting roles as persons, players, characters, and interlocutors, while critically engaging the boarding school world. Space after the game for participants to reflect on the game experience was necessary for them to begin the transition from *imagining in* to their characters to *imagining out* back into their quotidian selves. While this paper establishes a foundation for approaching role-playing games as critical cultural artifacts situated at the intersection of narrative, performance, and play, the scale of this study remains far too small to generalize or predict how this approach might play out in the broader gamer population. Further exploration into praxis-oriented gaming development may indicate if this approach represents as rich a field of intervention as this project suggests.

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52. William J. White, "Playing House in a World of Night: Discursive Trajectories of Masculinity in a Tabletop Role-Playing Game," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 2 (2011), 29.

53. Kaisa Kangas, "Experimental Anthropology," *Nordic Larp Talks on YouTube*, 11 February 2015. Last accessed 28 August 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCj93m9u3Xs

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Character Creation: The Symbolic Annihilation of Race in *Dungeons & Dragons*

TiMar Long

Abstract

Art plays an important role in a gaming supplement. It helps to foster the imagination. It gives people an idea of what the world looks like. It clues both the gamemaster and the players into what one can visually expect from the world they are playing. It helps to establish the norms and the extraordinary. It can also serve as inspiration for adventures, characters, and action. The 5th Edition *Dungeons & Dragons* is celebrated for the amount of diversity in its artwork. But how diverse is 5th Edition? This article explores the diversity of 5th Edition by comparing its artwork with the representations found in *Dungeons & Dragons*' previous incarnations. Utilizing the theory of symbolic annihilation, this article considers the effects of a lack of minority representation in artwork. The exclusion of minorities in earlier incarnations of *Dungeons & Dragons* can have negative effects on both minorities—by making them feel less welcome in gaming—and on whites, by limiting their exposure to different ideas and cultures. However, the artwork does show positive growth over the years with minorities gaining more prominence as the game expands. Finally, this study serves as a launching point from which future studies on gaming artwork can take place. Thus, this article joins an ongoing conversation about the placement and representation of people of color in the role-playing games hobby.

Introduction

The artwork for a role-playing game can be one of the most important aspects of the gaming experience. It helps to give us an idea of what the world looks like in that game. It helps to inspire the kinds of characters we might want to make. It can serve as a method for determining what is and is not normal in a setting. Is the artwork in *Dungeons & Dragons* racially imbalanced? Have things gotten better since the beginning of the hobby? Wizards of the Coast is praised for the diversity of their new 5th Edition line, but is it truly diverse? This project seeks to find out by examining the artwork in the *Player's Handbook* for each edition of the game. By using the theory of symbolic annihilation, I will explore whether or not minorities are adequately represented in the artwork. *Dungeons & Dragons* was chosen because it is not only the first role-playing game, it is the one that has experienced the most exposure to non-gamers. In addition to having produced a gaming line, *Dungeons & Dragons* also appeared in novels, video games, TV shows, and movies. During the 1980s, it even made media headlines when conservative Christians feared that the game might be introducing vulnerable kids to the occult.

The question of race in the artwork is of growing concern for gamers.[1] Paizo, the maker of the fantasy themed role-playing game Pathfinder, often advertises the diversity of its character artwork.[2] They actively talk about how the characters in their gaming world are black, white, Asian, straight, bisexual, and homosexual. The *Pathfinder* comic, for instance, depicts a same sex relationship between its Middle Eastern-themed female cleric and a female elven rogue. The success of *Pathfinder*, allowing it to be a viable contender against *Dungeons & Dragons*, illustrates people's interest in diversity.

Diversity is also becoming a popular topic of discussion for gamers online as well. Gaming as Other is a YouTube video series produced by Indie+ that explores the topics of race, gaming, and diversity in the hobby using minority members drawn from the community.[3] These panelists have explored issues of erasure in gaming, problems with fantasy races, and the delicate issues of stereotypes, tropes, and tokenism. Katriel Page has written on the growth of diversity in the hobby,[4] noting that such companies as Onyx Path and Evil Hat are producing books that

1. For the purpose of this discussion gamers are defined as individuals who engage in tabletop role-playing games.

2. Paizo discusses its diversity stance at numerous conventions throughout the year. One such discussion took place during their GenCon 2014 panel, themed on how they can make their setting more diverse and inclusive. Role-playing Public Radio, "Diversity in Gaming Panel at GenCon 2014," *RPPR*, August 21, 2014. http://slangdesign.com/rppr/2014/08/panel-discussion/diversity-in-gaming-panel-at-gen-con-2014/

3. Gaming as Other discussions can be found here: Indie+, "Gaming as Other Playlist," *YouTube*, February 6, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJyUXI7hzVWef0HB-Z9zQk5iKESrlxQg9

4. Katriel Paige, "Making the Gaming Table Bigger: Diversity in Tabletop Gaming," *Paste*, September 16, 2015. http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/09/making-the-table-bigger-diversity-in-tabletop-gami.html

offer a more diverse setting, while also offering tips and pointers on how to make the fantasy genre more diverse.[5] Meanwhile A.A. George has written about the difficulties of finding acceptance in the gaming community for people of color.[6] Finally, in "Why Minority Settings in RPGs Matter," Whitney "Strix" Beltrán explores the importance of adding minorities to gaming products, highlighting how including minorities not only signals that they are welcomed in the hobby, but also opens the door to powerful and fascinating stories, stories that might not otherwise be told if we only stick to white experiences.[7]

This research seeks to fill a hole in the literature by using the theory of symbolic annihilation and applying it to role-playing games. It will also serve as a starting point for a conversation about whether or not role-playing game books show equal representation for minorities. Thus, this research will be able to help inform other scholars who seek to have discussions on race representation in gaming. This research also seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations such as those held by groups like Gaming as Other, adding a more scholarly focus to the discussion.

Literature Review

Mass media has a powerful affect on our lives. As Gaye Tuchman points out, mass media is where we learn our basic lessons for life.[8] For Tuchman, mass media has replaced the church as the site through which we learn about our morals and values. Thus, mass media serves as a means through which we are socialized.[9] As such, it can have a huge impact on what we think of others, or even what we think of ourselves and our position in society. We give meaning to the images we receive from consuming mass media and those images can have an effect on how we evaluate ourselves.[10]

How people are portrayed in mass media also has bearing. Stereotypes within mass media can lead to negative impacts for minority populations.[11] Negative depictions of blacks, for instance, can lower self-esteem.[12] Studies on women's image in the media has highlighted how negative portrayals can be damaging, also leading to lower self-esteem.[13] The lack of diverse portrayal of women can oftentimes lock them into stereotyped roles that may be hard to ignore or move outside of.[14] It is also possible that such portrayals can have an effect of leading women to become invisible, making them appear to be less important.[15]

These negative portrayals and lack of overall representation is termed symbolic annihilation by Tuchman, a state in which women are condemned and trivialized.[16] By not showing certain groups, sometimes called the *out group*, mass media effectively controls the message we receive about these groups, telling us what we should find important about them or overall denoting how important society as a whole may feel about the out group.[17] As Merskin points out when discussing the symbolic annihilation of Native Americans, the overall effect can be dehumanizing.[18] This dehumanizing effect can reduce the out group to a collection of tropes and stereotypes.

5. Katriel Paige, "5 Ways to Diversify Your High Fantasy Game," Pastemagazine.com, July 21, 2015. http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/07/5-ways-to-diversify-your-high-fantasy-game.html

6. A. A. George, "Gaming's Race Problem: GenCon and Beyond," Tor.com, August 13, 2014. http://www.tor.com/2014/08/13/gamings-race-problem-gen-con-and-beyond/

7. Whitney Strix Beltrán, "Why Minority Settings in RPGs Matter," Tor.com, April 27, 2015. http://www.tor.com/2015/04/27/why-minority-settings-in-rpgs-matter/

8. Gaye Tuchman, "Introduction: The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, edited by Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benét, 3–38. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1978.

9. Hugh Klein and Kenneth S. Shiffman, "Underrepresentation and Symbolic Annihilation of Socially Disenfranchised Groups ('Out Groups') in Animated Cartoons," *Howard Journal of Communications* 1, no. 20 (2009): 55–72; Sarah Eschholz, Jana Bufkin, and Jenny Long, "Symboloic Reality Bites: Women and Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Modern Film," *Sociology Spectrum*, no. 22 (2002): 299–334.

10. Steven C. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture," *Social Problems* 2, no. 34 (1987): 122–40; Yi Mou and Wei Peng, "Gender and Racial Stereotypes in Popular Video Games," in *Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education*, edited by Richard E. Ferdig, 922-937. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2009.

11. Ibid.; Glascock, Jack, and Catherine Preston-Schreck, "Gender and Racial Stereotypes in Daily Newspaper Comics: A Time-Honored Tradition?" *Sex Roles* 7/8, no. 51 (2004): 423.

12. Ibid.

13 Ibid.; Janice McCabe et al., "Gender in Twentieth Century Children's Books," *Gender & Society* 2, no. 25 (2011): 197–226; Tuchman, 1978.

14. Ibid.

15. McCabe et al., 2011.

16. Tuchman, 1978.

17. Klein and Shiffman, 2009.

18. Debra Merskin, "Sending Up Signals: A Survey of Native American Media Use and Representation in the Mass Media," *Howard Journal of Communication* 9, no. 1 (October 1998): 333-345.

The use of underrepresentation and stereotypes helps to control the message and image of minorities by suggesting that minorities lack equal access to our cultural toolkits.[19] The objects that our culture produce oftentimes serves as battlegrounds for racial tension in our society. Furthermore, as Dubin notes, we project meaning onto these objects, as it helps us to orientate ourselves to the world.[20]

As such, the symbolic realm oftentimes serves as a way to support the dominant group.[21] Indeed, white male dominance is reproduced via mass media.[22] Meanwhile, blacks and other minorities oftentimes find themselves ignored by media, being mostly demeaned and stereotyped.[23] However, this does not have to be the case; Humphrey and Schuman found that the positive portrayal of blacks on *Sesame Street* led to overall higher opinions of blacks by white children who watched the show.[24] Thus, more positive portrayals of out groups can also lead to more positive reception of them in daily life.

A prime example of symbolic annihilation in action comes from TV shows such as *Friends, Seinfeld,* and *How I Meet Your Mother.* Set in New York City, these shows rarely feature people of color. This lack of diversity goes unacknowledged within the show despite how diverse New York is in reality. Instead, minorities tend to make a guest appearance in the shows, often not being seen again until the plot requires a minority character once more. Also, these characters often appear to have less complex stories or little acknowledgement of their differing identity, which is in line with colorblind attitudes seen frequently in media.

What makes role-playing a unique site to explore the lack of representation in the artwork of gaming products is the way in which role-playing games (RPGs) differ from traditional forms of mass media. As Tresca notes, RPGs differ in that they are an act of co-creation.[25] A person takes on a persona that they themselves create and then attempts to live out the experiences of that character in an imagined world created by another individual for the purpose of this activity. As Fuist points out, gaming can serve as a means of projection for cultural representation, or its lack thereof.[26]

While gaming may serve as a means for escaping reality,[27] it can also serve as a site for alternate identity construction.[28] These identities are given a chance to explore new realities and interact in different ways with different types of people and culture. In the realm of fantasy, these cultures are broadened to include races and cultures that do not exist in our everyday world, such as elves, dwarves, and dragons.

The artwork has a decidedly Euro-centric look and feel, since *Dungeons & Dragons* was initially inspired in part by J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.[29] Since the game was inspired by Tolkien's work, there was little room for a minority presence, moreso in regards to the fantasy races that Tolkien portrayed as being white. Diversity in humans was found to be lacking previous to the 3rd Edition.[30] Thus, whiteness is established as the normative experience by which all other characters and races would be judged.[31] Indeed, Tresca notes that the writers of 4th Edition set out to remove the lack of diversity found within *Dungeons & Dragons*.[32]

19. Scott Coltrane and Melinda Messineo, "The Perpetuation of Subtle Prejudice: Race and Gender Imagery in 1990s Television Advertising," *Sex Roles* 5/6, no. 42 (2000): 363–89.

20. Dubin, Steven C. "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture." *Social Problems* 2, no. 34 (1987): 122–40.

21. Ibid.; Sarah Eschholz, Jana Bufkin, and Jenny Long, "Symbolic Reality Bites: Women and Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Modern Film," *Sociological Spectrum* 22, no. 3 (2002): 299-334.

22. Eschholz et al., 2002.

23. Eschholz et al., 2002; Mou and Peng, 2009.

24. Ronald, Humphrey and Howard Schuman, "The Portrayal of Blacks in Magazine Advertisements: 1950-1982," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, no. 48 (2001): 551–63.

25. Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.

26. Todd Nicholas Fuist, "The Agentic Imagination," in *Immersive Gameplay*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2012).

27. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1983; Nephew, Michelle, "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, 120–39. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2006.

28. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2010).

29. Tresca 2011; Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, Peoples and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games*, San Diego, CA: Unreason Press, 2012; Fine 1983; Chris Van Dyke, "Race in Dungeons & Dragons," *Race in D&D*, November 18, 2008. https://raceindnd.wordpress.com/2008/11/18/nerd-nite-presentation-november-18th-2008/.

30. Tresca, 2011; Van Dyke, 2008.

31. Van Dyke, 2008.

32. Tresca, 2011.

Methodology

For this study, I will be reviewing the artwork in the *Player's Handbook* throughout the various editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Only one book was chosen from each edition. In the case of the Wizards of the Coast run with *Dungeons & Dragons*, the artwork in the core books remains the same throughout the life of that edition. TSR was a different case, however, with reprints within an edition sometimes receiving a new set of artwork. Due to the difficulties of tracking down all such variants from TSR's run with *Dungeons & Dragons*, I opted to select one book from each edition that they published to code. My analysis includes the following texts:

1) The basic edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, using the red box rule book (a 1983 reprint) originally published in 1974
2) The *Dungeons & Dragons Rules Cyclopedia*, which was an updated version of the basic rule set, published concurrently with *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and published in 1991
3) *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 1st Edition published in 1977 using the 2008 reprint
4) *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 2nd Edition published in 1989 using the 1995 reprint
5) *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition published in 2000
6) *Dungeons & Dragons* 4th Edition published in 2008, using *Player Handbook 1*
7) *Dungeons & Dragons* 4th Edition published in 2014.

I used only the artwork that depicted human or demi-human characters. Demi-humans are the fantasy character races—such as dwarves, elves, and halflings—that resemble humans, but are fantasy in origin. Thus, background pictures that were mostly landscape or pictures in which the humanoid characters were non-descript and part of a bigger picture were excluded. In addition, artwork that depicted only monsters was excluded as well since they were not the focus of this study. See **Table 1** for a breakdown of the number of images and number of characters per edition.

Variables

The characters were coded along six variables: sex, race, stereotype, character class, heroics, and edition. The edition variable coded from what edition of the game the character in question came. Sex was broken down into four variables: male, female, unknown, and non-applicable. For the purpose of this study, sex is to be understood as the apparent biological differences between individuals. Unknown was used in instances where the characters biological sex could not be determined. It is unknown at this time, however, if such gender ambiguities were done on purpose by the artist.[33] Non-applicable referred only to monster races that appeared in the

33. See the 5th Edition *Player's Handbook* page 9 for example: the armored dwarf leading the charge towards the dragon.

Table 1: Number of images and characters per edition included in the study.

Number of Images and Characters

	Number of Images	Number of Characters
Basic Dungeons & Dragons	26	53
1st Edition AD&D	56	155
2nd Edition AD&D	47	111
Rules Cyclopedia	53	130
3rd Edition D&D	47	80
4th Edition D&D	63	144
5th Edition D&D	81	171
Total	375	644

artwork alongside the humans and demi-humans. In some cases, the overall sex of a monster could not be determined, such as with dragons and beholders, and in other cases, it was easy to tell, such as with goblins and succubi. However, in order to remain consistent throughout the monster category, and as to not distort the numbers for player races, I opted to code all monster races as non-applicable.

Race—Variable

Race was broken down into a total of twenty-four variables. This includes all the playable races from the start of Basic—with humans, halflings, elves and dwarves—to 5th Edition, which had humans, elves, dwarves, halflings, half-elves, half-orcs, gnomes, dragonborn, and tiefling. These races were then further coded for ethnic/racial divides. For humans, that would include black, Asian (those characters that appeared to be East Asian), Arabic (those characters that looked like they were from the Middle East), and Native American. I did not include codes for ethnic or minority groups that did not appear in the artwork. As such, I recognize that this process may leave out other minority groups and ethnicities, such as south Asians, but for ease of discussion and coding, I opted to only include the ones depicted in the books. In the case that the ethnicity of the human was indistinguishable, the character was coded as Human: Unknown.

Several of the demi-human races also developed ethnicities over the years. For example by 5th Edition, elf artwork had grown to include normal elves, black elves, Drow, and Other, the latter of which served as a catch all category for non-white elves whose skin tone were not reflections of those found in humans, such as the blueish skin of a moon elf.[34] The Drow are deserving of a special notation, in part due to the controversial nature of the race. The Drow served as one of *Dungeons & Dragons* first demi-humans of color, being elves with jet black skin and white hair. However, they remained unplayable as a standard character until 5th Edition, in part due to their role as villains in the setting. They differ in skin tone from black elves, who would later show up in 4th Edition, but as Misha B. points out when discussing playing a black elf, many gamers automatically think of Drow when a gamer of color describes their elf as being black.[35] Unpacking the Drow is a study unto itself and is unfortunately beyond the scope of this project. While the demi-human races were coded individually, for the purpose of analysis, they were lumped together into a single category. This process was done to make the demi-humans more manageable.

Stereotype—Variable

Characters were then coded for whether or not they were presented as a racial stereotype. This label mainly applied to the human characters that, in some cases, were drawn using more standard tropes for the given race. For example, the Asian human on page 140 of the 5th Edition book was drawn wearing samurai armor as opposed to more European fantasy-based armor that most other characters were drawn wearing throughout the book. Thus, she was counted as a racial stereotype.[36] All monstrous characters were coded as monsters, with the exception of dragons, who received their own code. Monsters were condensed to a single variable for two reasons. First, since the study did not focus on them, it was determined not to be as important to know the type of monster that was in the picture. Secondly, it also helped to keep the number of races coded more manageable. Dragons were given their own coded variable due to them being an iconic feature of *Dungeons & Dragons.*

Character Class—Variable

Characters were also broken down into their classes. Characters were only coded for the classes that appeared with in that edition of the game. Thus, while a magic user from Basic is pretty much the same character class as a wizard from 5th Edition, they were each coded according to the class name of that edition. This process resulted in a total of twenty-seven character classes. Before *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, elves, halflings, and dwarves were treated as their own class and, therefore, were coded as such. In the event that the class was not identifiable from the artwork, they were coded as unknown class, and in the case of magic users, unknown spellcaster. As the number of classes grew in the game, the uniqueness of the classes in the artwork became more ambiguous and, thus, unknown class/spellcaster became a more common variable. Monsters were given their own class. No class was used when the character in the picture appeared to be a non-player character (NPC), as was the case for guards, normal people on the

34. See page 25 of the 5th Edition *Player's Handbook* for an example of an elf that was coded as Elf Other.

35. Indie+. "Gaming as Other: Fantasy Races." *YouTube*. May 10, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyOZRWxFqNk&index=8&list=PLJyUXI7hzVWef0HB-Z9zQk5iKESrlxQg9

36. For additional examples, see the two black characters depicted on page 215 of the *Rules Cyclopedia* or the Native American depicted on page 248 of the *Rules Cyclopedia*.

Table 2: Year of publication for each edition and year of census data used.

Edition and Census Data

	Year of Publication	Census Data
Basic Dungeons & Dragons	1974	1970
1st Edition AD&D	1977	1980
2nd Edition AD&D	1989	1990
Rules Cyclopedia	1991	1990
3rd Edition D&D	2000	2000
4th Edition D&D	2008	2010
5th Edition D&D	1015	2010

street, or when a character was depicted talking to an armorer.[37]

Heroics—Variable

The variable "heroic" was used to determine how the character was featured in the artwork. Thus, it was broken down into heroic, villainous, and neutral. Player-characters are meant to be the heroes of the adventures, but it was not always easy to tell if the character in the picture was meant to represent a player-character. Thus characters were only defined as heroic when there was a villainous threat being depicted for them to fight against. While a character could only be defined as heroic while being depicted against a villain, it was possible for a villain to be the only character depicted in a scene, such as a necromancer raising undead[38] or when a Drow is stalking a guard.[39] Because being depicted as heroic required a villain in the scene, the greater bulk of the characters were coded as neutral.

Edition and Census Data

In order to determine if a race was symbolically annihilated, I used the same method utilized by Klein and Shiffman.[40] They defined symbolic annihilation as follows: "We will consider a group to be underrepresented if its prevalence is less than half of that observed in the population at large, and we will consider it to be an example of symbolic annihilation if its prevalence is less than one quarter of that found in the society at large." Therefore, each edition will be compared to census data to the closest year of publication, or in the case of reprints, closest year to the reprint. See Table 2 for a listing of the year of publication and the census data used for that edition.

Results

Over its lifetime, *Dungeons & Dragons* has depicted 38% of its characters as white humans. Leaving out monsters, which constituted 18% of the characters depicted, the next largest group to be depicted were elves at 7% and then dwarves at 6%. Totaled together, human minorities composed 4% of the character pictures sampled. This places minority humans tied with halflings, who also composed 4% of the sampled characters. Broken down individually by race, blacks were 2%, Asians 1%, Native Americans .4%, and Arabic .4%. The category of Human: Unknown, which was not added to total minority count or the white human count, was at 1%.

Compared to the life of the game, minorities were typically depicted less frequently than any other type of humanoid playable character. For instance, while over the life of the game, blacks were represented 2% of the time, the fantasy race known as tieflings—a race of humans descended from demons and devils—also equaled 2%. Tieflings were introduced as a playable race in 4th Edition, thus gaining the same exposure and prominence equal to blacks within a six-year time span. The same is also true for Dragonborn—a race descended from dragons—which were also introduced in the 4th Edition of the game.

Minorities would make their first appearance in the *Dungeon & Dragons* line in the 1st Edition

37. For an example, see the male and female characters being haunted by a ghost depicted on page 162 of the 2nd Edition *Advanced D&D*.

38. See page 213 of the *Rules Cyclopedia* for an example.

39. See page 194 of the 5th Edition game.

40. Hugh Klein and Kenneth S. Shiffman, "Underrepresentation and Symbolic Annihilation of Socially Disenfranchised Groups ('Out Groups') in Animated Cartoons," *Howard Journal of Communications* 1, no. 20 (2009): 55–72.

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons book. However, their representation from that point on would remain sparse. With the exception of the *Rules Cyclopedia*, which featured 15 characters of color, minority representation remained small. For instance there was one black character depicted in the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, with blackness absent in 2nd Edition *AD&D*. The *Rules Cyclopedia*, however, features 8 black characters and 5th Edition features 7. Asian humans—depicted as East Asian—remained throughout the run after their introduction in 1st Edition *AD&D*. Both Native American and Arabic characters—i.e. characters that look like they are from the Middle East—were used a total of 3 times. Both appeared in the Rules Cyclopedia. However, Native Americans would disappear after the *Rules Cyclopedia*, being originally introduced in 2nd Edition AD&D, and Arabic characters would not be seen again until 5th Edition. Overall, the *Rules Cyclopedia* was the most racially diverse book, featuring at least one type of the various human races coded in this project.

Of the 37 minority images in the rule books, 16 of them were coded as stereotyped. Thus, 43% of the time, a minority character was depicted in a stereotypical role for their race. Out of the 18 times a black character was depicted, 6 (or 33%) of their depictions were in stereotypical roles. 5 out of 13 Asians (or 38%) were depicted as a stereotype. 2 out of the 3 (or 66%) Native Americans were depicted as a stereotype. Finally, 3 out of 3 Arabic depictions (100%) were in the form of a stereotype.

During the 4th Edition of the game, Wizards of the Coast introduced demi-humans of color. As such, there are 2 black non-Drow elves, 3 black dwarves, and 1 black halfling. This trend, however, does not continue into 5th Edition, which only features 1 black dwarf. These individuals were coded separately from both humans of color and the normal demi-humans from which they were drawn. For the purpose of data analysis, however, they were lumped into the general category of their particular demi-human race and were also added (in parenthesis) to their human counterpart. This process allowed for people of color to be analyzed both in a real world sense in regards to their representation in the book and also in regards to fantasy representations of them as demi-humans. However, it is worth pointing out that these characters were more likely to be female than male; the black halfling, both black non-Drow elves, and two of the black dwarves were all female characters.

Men of color were far more likely to be depicted than women of color. 83% of the black characters depicted were male. 61% of the Asian characters depicted were male and 100% of the Native American depicted were male. For Arabic, 1 out of the 3 characters was male, with 1 of the 3 being female and the last one with an unidentifiable gender.

Looking at whether or not these portrayals are heroic, it is first important to remember that, overall, 17% of the characters depicted were deemed heroic, 61% were deemed neutral, and 21% were deemed villainous, with most of those being monsters. As such, minorities were depicted heroically 7.6% of the time and neutral 5% of the time. Only .5% of the depictions portrayed a minority character as villainous. Collectively, humans were depicted heroically 55% of the time, neutral 52% of the time, and as villains 5.5% of the time. For a full breakdown by race please, see Table 3.

Table 3: Overall depiction of races as heroic, villainous, or neutral.

Heroic Depiction

	Heroic	Villainous	Neutral
Characters (All)	17%	21%	61%
Minorities (All)	7.6%	.5%	5%
Human (All)	55%	6%	52%
Black	27%	5%	66%
Asian	23%	0%	77%
Native American	66%	0%	33%
Arab	33%	0%	66%
White	21%	3%	76%

Symbolic Annihilation of Race

The following charts are broken down into four categories: underrepresentation, symbolic annihilation, in-book representation, and population. Underrepresentation tells us whether or not the given minority was, in the very least, adequately represented in the books. Underrepresentation occurs if the prevalence of artwork for a given race is less than half of its percentage in the population at large. Symbolic annihilation tells us whether or not a given race is symbolically annihilated in the book. Symbolic annihilation occurs if the prevalence of artwork for a race is less than 25% of the total population. In-book representation is the total percentage that a race is depicted in the book. Finally, population gives the races' actual percentage of the population according to the most recent year's census data. In addition to the 5 human races coded, in-book representation for demi-humans was also given for the sake of comparison to the human races depicted.

Table 4: Basic *Dungeons & Dragons* racial representation percentages compared to 1970 census data.

Basic *D&D*				1970 Census Data
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In-Book Representation	Population
Black	5.5%	3%	0%	11%
Asian	.35%	.17%	0%	.7%
Arab	-	-	0%	-
Native American	.2%	.1%	0%	.04%
White	43%	22%	60%	87%
Demi-Human	-	-	21%	-

Table 4 depicts the levels at which underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation occur for the races coded in this project. Data was not available for the Arabic population. Due to their total lack of representation, all minority groups are underrepresented and symbolically annihilated in the Basic edition of Dungeons & Dragons.

Table 5: Advanced Dungeons & Dragons racial representation percentages compared to 1980 census data.

Advanced D&D 2nd Edition				1980 Census Data
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In-Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	0%	11%
Asian	1.5%	.75%	1.3%	1.6%
Arab	.2%	.1%	0%	.3%
Native American	-	-	.6%	-
White	40%	20%	50%	83%
Demi Human	-	-	13%	-

Table 2 depicts the levels at which underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation would occur. Data was not available for Native Americans. Blacks would be underrepresented if they were depicted 5.5% of the time and symbolically annihilated if they were represented less than 3% of the time. They made up .6% of the artwork thus they were both symbolically annihilated and underrepresented. Meanwhile Asians were depicted in 1.3% of the artwork. This means they were neither underrepresented nor symbolically annihilated.

Table 6: *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 2nd Edition racial representation percentages compared to 1990 census data.

Advanced D&D 2nd Edition				1990 Census Data
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In-Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	0%	12%
Asian	1.5%	.75%	2%	3%
Arab	.2%	.1%	0%	.4%
Native American	-	-	0%	-
White	40%	20%	43%	80%
Demi Human	-	-	9%	-

No data was available for Native Americans from the US census. Still with 0% representation, we can consider them symbolically annihilated alongside blacks and Arabs. Asians, on the other hand are neither underrepresented nor symbolically annihilated, as they would be underrepresented if their depiction was less than 1.5% and symbolically annihilated if it was less than .75%. Their actual in-book representation was 2%.

Table 7: *Rules Cyclopedia* racial representation percentages compared to 1990 census data.

Rules Cyclopedia				1990 Census Data
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In-Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	6%	12%
Asian	1.5%	.75%	3%	3%
Arab	.2%	.1%	7%	.4%
Native American	-	-	1.5%	-
White	40%	20%	50%	80%
Demi Human	-	-	9%	-

Data was not available for Native Americans, though it is worth noting that they made up 1.5% of the artwork. Blacks met the threshold for being underrepresented, but were not symbolically annihilated. Both Asians and Arabs, however, were not underrepresented or symbolically annihilated. This is because their in-book representation of 3% and 7% respectively puts them well above both underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation thresholds.

Table 8: *D&D* 3rd Edition racial representation percentages compared to 2000 census data.

D&D 3rd Edition				2000 Census Data
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In-Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	1.2%	12%
Asian	1.8%	.9%	1.2%	3.6%
Arab	.2%	.1%	0%	.4%
Native American	.7%	.35%	0%	1.4%
White	34%	17%	25%	69%
Demi Human	-	-	53%	-

All human races in 3rd Edition were both underrepresented and symbolically annihilated. The drop in representation for white characters can be attributed to both the growth of the use of demi-humans and the overall decline in population of whites. In 3rd Edition, the demi-human characters grew from 21% in Basic to 53% in 3rd Edition. Meanwhile, the overall drop of whites in the population combined with their drop in overall representation in the book means that while they are not symbolically annihilated, they are underrepresented.

Table 9: *D&D* 4th Edition racial representation percentages compared to 2000 census data.

D&D 4rd Edition				2000 Census Data
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In-Book Representation	Population
Black	6.5%	3.25%	7% (4.1%)	13%
Asian	2.5%	1.2%	1.3%	5%
Arab	.25%	.1%	0%	.5%
Native American	.85%	.4%	0%	1.7%
White	36%	18%	14%	72%
Demi Human	-	-	50%	-

In *D&D* 4th Edition, blacks, Native Americans, Arabs, and whites were both underrepresented and symbolically annihilated. Meanwhile Asians were underrepresented, but not symbolically annihilated. If you count the black demi-humans, then black representation rises to 4.1%, thus making them symbolically annihilated but not underrepresented. Whites' underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation can once again be attributed to a higher representation of demi-humans at 50%.

Table 10: *D&D* 5th Edition racial representation percentages compared to 2010 census data.

D&D 5rd Edition				2010 Census Data
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In-Book Representation	Population
Black	6.5%	3.25%	4% (4.6%)	13%
Asian	2.5%	1.2%	1.1%	5%
Arab	.25%	1.1%	1.1%	.5%
Native American	.85%	.4%	0%	1.7%
White	36%	18%	26%	72%
Demi Human	-	-	38%	-

Blacks were underrepresented, but not symbolically annihilated, even if you take into account the extra .6% from black demi-humans. Asians and Native Americans are both symbolically annihilated and underrepresented. Asians were underrepresented and met the threshold for symbolical annihilation. Whites were once again underrepresented and symbolically annihilated, but again this factor can be attributed to more demi-humans in the art, which were at 38%.

Discussion

Dungeons & Dragons artwork has led an interesting life. Under the TSR era of the game, the artwork was dominated by white male characters, with people of color, women, and even the demi-human races receiving little attention. When Wizards of the Coast took over, the amount of artwork not only increased, but so did the amount dedicated to minorities, women, and demi- humans. Taken as a whole, we can learn a lot from the artwork of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

During the TSR years, minorities were not only underrepresented, but they were symbolically annihilated in most editions of the game. There are notable exceptions. After being introduced in 1st Edition, Asians received representation on par with their representation in society as a whole. Also, the *Rules Cyclopedia* had better overall levels of representation as compared with earlier TSR efforts. Blacks were underrepresented, but they were not symbolically annihilated. Asians and Arabs were both represented at levels equal to or exceeding their overall population representation.

However the *Rules Cyclopedia*, while racially diverse, presented its own set of problems. 66% of its minority artwork was depicted as stereotypes. While this level is better than 1st Editions' 75%, the *Rules Cyclopedia* presented the most diverse set of racial characters, in addition to having more minority characters than previous and future books. Thus, even at their best, minority characters seem to be unable to escape damaging racial tropes. This factor also indicates how negatively minorities may have been viewed by those commissioning and illustrating the artwork for the rulebook. Since the *Rules Cyclopedia* was published in the 1990s, it begs the question: is lack of representation better than racially-stereotyped representation?

Stereotypes are important because they can influence a person's attitudes and behaviors towards the group the artwork is about.[41] Stereotypes can arise from a lack of information or from misinformation.[42] This problem is understandable given the lack of exposure some white gamers, artist, and writers may have with minority cultures. However, such misinformation can also lead to those who are stereotyped feeling diminished and suffer

41 Amy J. C. Cuddy and Susan T. Fiske, "Doddering but Dear: Process, Content and Function in Stereotyping of Older Persons," in *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons*, edited by Todd D. Nelson, 3–26 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

42 Tom Robinson, Bob Gustafson, and Mark Popovich, "Perceptions of Negative Stereotypes of Older People in Magazine Advertisements: Comparing the Perceptions of Older Adults and College Students," *Ageing & Society*, no. 28 (2008): 233–51.

from lower levels of self-esteem.[43] Lowered levels of self-esteem can have an overall discouraging effect on gamers of color, giving them less reason to participate and engage in the gaming hobby. There are also negative effects for white gamers, as repeated exposure to negative stereotypes and portrayals can lead to them to develop a distorted view on minorities and minority cultures.[44]

Wizards of the Coast takes a different approach, choosing to focus more on raising the visibility of the game's fantasy races. Still, with the exception of Arabs, most minorities do not reach the representation heights that they do in the *Rules Cyclopedia*. Thus 3rd Edition shows an overall drop in representation. Blacks, Native Americans, and Arabs find themselves both underrepresented and symbolically annihilated in 3rd and 4th Edition. This issue occurs despite Tresca's claim that the overall design goal for 4th Edition was to move away from a Euro-focused game.[45] However, it is worth noting that 4th Edition does introduce demi-humans of color; they virtually disappear again in 5th Edition.

Things do improve some for the 5th Edition. Blacks are underrepresented, but not symbolically annihilated. They also see an overall large growth in representation, only rivaled by their appearance in the *Rules Cyclopedia*. However, unlike the *Rules Cyclopedia*, their role in the artwork is not as racially stereotyped. Meanwhile, Arabs make a return to the game, having been gone from 3rd and 4th Edition. While their role was stereotyped, their inclusion was greater than their representation in the general population. However, Native Americans are still, sadly, missing.

Asian depiction over the course of the Wizards of the Coast run with the game varies. They drop from their high of 3% in the *Rules Cyclopedia* and hover between 1.1% in representation to 1.3%. Thus, they are both underrepresented and symbolically annihilated in 3rd and 5th, while only being underrepresented in 4th Edition. Therefore, their depiction in the artwork does not keep pace with their population gains in society in general.

Under Wizards of the Coast, the depiction of white characters in the artwork also takes a dramatic plunge. Under TSR, white representation in the artwork was between 50% to 60%. In 3rd Edition, their representation drops to 25% and then drops again in 4th Edition to 14%. This drop to 14% does help validate Tresca's (2011) observation that the designers of 4th Edition were attempting to make a less Euro-centric game,[46] but this was not preceded by overall gains for minority characters. Instead, the demi-human races received more artwork. However, the demi-humans used still embody Euro-centric ideas of fantasy. This factor indicates that despite moving away from Euro-centric humans, the publishers still made heavy use of the elements of Euro-centric fantasy. Overall, this drop makes white characters underrepresented in 3rd, 4th, and 5th Edition and symbolically annihilated in 4th Edition.

The demi-humans also deserve special mention. Their role during the TSR years of the game was minimal and, as has been noted before, increased dramatically under Wizards of the Coast's art direction. Still, the greater bulk of the demi-human races are white. With the exception of their depiction in 4th Edition and one appearance in 5th Edition, elves, dwarves, halflings, and gnomes are all white, thus reinforcing the normativeness of whiteness within the fantasy genre. While white humans decline, white demi-humans grow. However, it is worth noting that the artwork for elves evolves, especially in 3rd Edition, where they take on quasi-Asian features, making half elves a mix between standard whites and a more Asianized elf.

Though not all the demi-human races are white, half-orcs introduced first in 1st Edition *AD&D* are presented as a more colorful demi-human race. However, their use is sparse, only showing up in 1st, 3rd, and 5th Edition. Between the three books, they number only 10. Also, the half-orc is presented as more barbaric and less civilized, especially when compared to the other demi-human races. This factor implies that the non-white demi-humans lack the same culture and goodness that their lighter skinned demi-humans have, mimicking contemporary race politics. Van Dyke backs this claim, pointing out the ways in which half-orcs are described using the same terms used against blacks.[47]

4th Edition does introduce tieflings and dragonborn, thus creating more non-white demi-humans, while removing the half-orc and adding the white and elvish-looking eladrin. But these depictions aren't as positive as the standard white demi humans. Neither the dragonborn nor the tiefling have their

43 Robinson, Gustafson, and Popovich, 2008.

44. Robinson, Gustafson, and Popovich, 2008; George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," *Journal of Communication* 2, no. 26 (1976): 173–99; George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "Growing up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, edited by Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 17–41 (London, UK: Routledge, 1994).

45. Tresca, 2011.

46. Tresca, 2011.

47. Van Dyke, 2008.

own empires and culture, mostly mixing in with the other races of the game. Furthermore, both look alien in nature, with dragonborn resembling humanoid dragons and teiflings being demonic in appearance, thus associating non-white demi-humans further with a sense of otherness. This practice designates non-white demi-humans as lacking the same kind of cultures and empires that humans, elves, and dwarves create. This problem is further compounded in 5th Edition, when all the non-white demi-human races—half orc, tiefling and dragonborn—are designated as uncommon, thus being less numerous in the world(s) that they share with humans and the usually white demi-humans. These races were also drawn from creatures that typically served as enemies of the player-characters in the past.

This problem is further compounded with the introduction of the Drow as a playable race option in 5th Edition. The Drow in previous editions have been depicted as the darker and more evil version of elves, living underground and enslaving other races. As Misha B., a panelist on Gaming As Other, points out, "you took a race, made them intentionally black-skinned, intentionally evil, and intentionally not good." Panelist Whitney "Strix" Beltrán goes on to elaborate, "So we took one race and we painted all the bad things we don't like about other races onto them. And so, in a way, the Drow are kings of race conflation. It's not that they just got one trait that is considered negative. They got all of them together in one mega load."[48] As such, the Drow can represent all that we see as evil in the world and all that the player-characters are supposed to stand against. These factors are all packaged in an extremely dark skin tone.

Their transition from villainous non-player race to a playable race continues the trend of non-white demi-humans being associated with negative traits and qualities. Whereas the tiefling, dragonborn, and half-orc lack civilization of their own, the Drow have their own empires marked by slavery, subjugation, and matriarchal-based sexism. Player-character Drow form an exception to these rules, being some of the few good Drow that reject their evil kin's culture. However, this aspect does not remove the fact that non-white demi-humans are not presented in as positive ways as the white demi-humans. This problem could have been alleviated had Wizards of the Coast continued to make use of demi-humans of color, especially non-Drow black elves, thus showing diversity even among the demi-human races and lessening the stigma of playing a non-white demi-human.

In this regard, these depictions can be otherizing. Both Frantz Fanon[49] and Edward Said[50] write about the othering of minorities and minority cultures by whites and western society. Fanon explores how this otherness is created in regards to blacks, illustrating how their racial existence in a white society sets them up to be the other. Meanwhile, Said extends the concept of the other to Eastern civilization, pointing out how the West manufactures an other that is less civilized and enlightened than it is. This process mirrors what happens to demi-humans of color, who get depicted as being less common and less civilized than the fantasy races that fit the more Euro-centric mold. Even the colonialism that inhabited the lands about which both Fanon and Said speak is replicated in the standard fantasy genre. As Fine points out, the fantasy lands that PCs inhabit are filled with treasures—treasures that are waiting for an intrepid band of adventures to discover.[51] This endless supply of treasure and adventure in the uncivilized parts of the gaming world in many ways mimics colonialism, with the demi-humans of color standing in for the natives of Africa and the Middle East.

Conclusion

People of color have experienced both positive growth and some setbacks over the history of *Dungeons & Dragons*. While their depiction has grown, it has not reached their height of depiction that was found in the problematic *Rules Cyclopedia*. Still, their roles were overall less stereotyped, showing a broader acceptance for differing roles of minorities in the artwork. However, some groups, such as Native Americans, are still severally underrepresented, if not outright symbolically annihilated. Additionally, other minority groups, such as South Asians, have yet to even make an appearance in the gaming artwork, rendering them invisible to gamers in general.

Where the game can improve is in a stronger representation in non-white demi-humans. When I was in college, one of the things that drew me to *Mage: the Ascension* was the depiction of a black mage named Dante on the cover. From that moment on, I was a loyal fan and customer for anything that they produced. The same effect could happen if Wizards of the Coast opts to include more artwork featuring a broader array of people of color in their demi-humans. This would also blunt the negative traits that many of their current non-white demi-humans seem to carry, such as a lack of

48. Indie+, "Gaming as Other: Fantasy Races," 2014.

49. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

50. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books edition (New York: Vintage, 1979).

51. Fine, 1983.

overall civilization, strong culture, alienness, and ties to infernal aspects and slavery. This revision would create a more welcome environment in which to game and likely draw in more people of color to the hobby. The artwork would also help broaden white gamer's ideas on what it means to live in a truly diverse world.

This research does, however, have a few limitations. By only looking at the *Player's Handbook*s, we are only examining a small sampling of the books devoted to *Dungeons & Dragons*. Over the 40 year time span, the game has produced hundreds of books. This amount of books increases the odds that people of color might have received equal representation as the game line progressed. While the *Player's Handbook* is the starting point for many gamers, it is by far not the only book most gamers buy and consume. Therefore, future studies could broaden the scope by looking at additional books, such as the 4th Editions *Player's Handbook 2* and *3*.

Also, the fact that TSR's run of *Dungeons & Dragons* had multiple reprints with different art direction makes it difficult to paint a clear picture of the possible diversity of the TSR line. It is possible that minority characters may have received more inclusion in later reprints of a particular edition. Thus, future studies could seek to broaden the scope of books examined from the TSR years, seeking to include more reprints and determine if the art direction remained the same or if it broadened the lines diversity.

Finally, future studies should look at the racialized component found in the non-human races. This component can include the ones open to players—half orcs, dragonborn, tiefling—and ones not open to players, such as orcs, kobolds, gnolls, and naga to name a few. Also, future studies in this vein can take a deeper look at the Drow and what their use over the life of *Dungeons & Dragons* has to say about race relations.

Taking this concept one step further, a study on the color of the monsters' races could examine the "us" vs. "them" nature determining many of the enemies in *Dungeons & Dragons*. This "us" vs. "them" dynamic is further compounded by the alignment system, in which some monsters are always considered evil—or born evil in a manner of speaking. This issue becomes problematic when the monster races can also be interpreted as stand-ins for real world races, as it inherently implies that some real world races and ethnic groups are born evil or inferior to the white male standard.

Ultimately, this study serves as a launching off point from which other research can be done. It provides a baseline for understanding how minorities have fared over the life of the game and demonstrates just how and in what ways minorities are depicted. While minority depiction and use could be better, this research does show how far the game has evolved in terms to how it respresents people of color.

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Player Choices in Tabletop RPGs: The Greek Connection

Dimitra Nikolaidou

Abstract

The opportunity for self-expression is one of the primary benefits tabletop role-playing games grant to the participants. Ideally, within a role-playing game, a player can adopt and perform any persona, limited only by each game's setting. In practice, though, the role-playing experience emerges from the interaction between player and game design. While players can be located anywhere in the world, the designers of popular, and thus more culturally influential games, tend to either originate from, or be heavily influenced by, North American culture. As a result, non-American gaming groups often need to negotiate American-influenced cultural frameworks during character creation and actual play. Given the influence of tabletop role-playing games in popular culture worldwide, the negotiation process informs both the study of role-playing games as well as cultural studies in general.

The present paper aims to examine the means through which international players negotiate American-influenced frameworks within the two most popular tabletop role-playing games, namely *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness, both during character creation and actual play, in order to successfully fulfill the self-expression function of these games. Literature review and textual analysis are employed to locate North American cultural frameworks within each game. The paper then examines through a cultural studies lens how and why such frameworks, along with relevant pop culture items, are likely to affect the players' choices.

Finally, the hypothesis is tested through a case study of the author's Greek gaming group, through the use of semi-structured interviews and survey analysis of the group's player-characters. The findings suggest that players recognize the existence of North American cultural frames within *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness, and consciously attempt to repurpose them through both narrative and performative techniques. Still, their narrative and performative choices remain informed by these frames, mainly during the character creation phase. Finally, respondents' answers suggest that diversity within a gaming setting affords greater freedom of expression to the players, even when elements from their own culture are absent.

Introduction

Tabletop role-playing is an act of co-creation, emerging out of the interaction between players, as well as the interaction between players and game design. While players can be located anywhere in the world, designers of popular games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or World of Darkness tend to either originate from[1] or, as journalist and game designer Juhana Pettersson suggests,[2] be heavily influenced by North American culture. As a result, non-American gaming groups often need to negotiate American-influenced cultural frameworks during character creation and actual play.

Research Question, Methodology and Findings

The present paper examines the means through which international players negotiate American-influenced frameworks within popular tabletop role-playing games during character creation and actual play, in order to successfully fulfill the self-expression function of these games.

To provide context for the final case study, the paper initially employs literature review and textual analysis in order to locate North American cultural frameworks within each game. Following that process, the paper examines using critical theory through a cultural studies lens how and why such frameworks—along with relevant pop culture items—are likely to affect the players' choices. Finally, the hypothesis is tested through a case study of the author's Greek gaming group, using a) semi-structured interviews and b) survey analysis of the group's player-characters (PCs).

The findings suggest that players recognize the existence of North American cultural frames within *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness, and consciously attempt to repurpose them through

1. The American origins of games and game designers is covered in Shannon Appelcline's exhaustive *Designers and Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game* Industry (Silver Spring: Evil Hat Productions, 2013).

2. Juhana Pettersson, "Nordic Larp and American Power." Juhanapettersson.com. April 7, 2014. http://www.juhanapettersson.com/2014/04/nordic-larp-and-american-power/.

both narrative and performative techniques. Still, their choices remain defined by these frames, mainly during the character creation phase. Finally, respondents' answers suggest that the more diverse a gaming setting is, the more freedom of expression is afforded to players even when elements from their own culture are absent.

Literature Review and Textual Analysis

Cultural Influences in Game Design

One of the main cultural influences on the act of role-playing is the game text itself, since the entirety of game design is contained within it. Jennifer Grouling Cover, whose research on role-playing games focuses on writing and narration, posits that "game rule books always serve as a key text that the players and DM interact with."[3] Daniel Mackay, who focuses on the aspect of performance in role-playing, suggests, "The player who reads a game text ... is created by that text."[4] Thus, the established importance of the gaming text suggests that its cultural identity will exert major influence on the act of role-playing.

The current paper focuses on the game design of *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness, as both scholarship and available statistical data prove these games to be market leaders[5] worldwide. Additionally, role-playing historian Shannon Appelcline showcases multiple times in his exhaustive *Designers and Dragons*, that a great number of tabletop role-playing games were created either in response or as homage to *Dungeons & Dragons*, signifying its importance beyond its market share.

The scholarly critiques below describe the ways in which researchers consider mostly *Dungeons & Dragons*, but also World of Darkness, to be distinctly "American." However, as American Studies scholars Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean have noted, the concept of a unified "American" culture hides "partial and selective views of what America has been or ought to be, grounded in the privileged status accorded to a white, male, middle class, heterosexual perspective."[6] Thus, the concepts described as "American" below, are not necessarily considered representative of American culture as a whole.

Dungeons & Dragons

Scholarship on tabletop role-playing games has established *Dungeons & Dragons* as a game deeply influenced by North American culture. *Dungeons & Dragons*' historian Jon Peterson[7] notes that "Gygax's literary sources[8] were first and foremost works of popular fiction" thus marking *Dungeons & Dragons* as a product of his own time and place: The USA in the 1970s. Sarah Lynne Bowman, whose research emphasizes the social and psychological functions of role-playing, states that "role-playing games emerged from ... age-old practices, but also from several cultural shifts inherent to American life in the latter half of the twentieth century."[9]

The cultural identity of *Dungeons & Dragons* influences its design and gameframe in many ways. As early as 1983, sociologist Gary Alan Fine considered the structure of dungeons and fantasy worlds reflective of the American concept of an unlimited supply of treasure, and the fact that no one suffers misfortune as a result of looting. Good and evil are viewed as opposing forces battling for control and wealth. Fine further posits that while the game masters might create any setting, they do not do so consciously, but rather use the American folk ideas into which they have been socialized. He notes four such folk ideas that he considers implicit in game design: (1) the image of unlimited goods, (2) the sharply defined oppositional nature of the world, (3) the distinguishing of sexuality and evil, and (4) the Puritan ethic and the nonrandom nature of luck, as

3. Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 138.

4. Daniel Mackay, *A New Performing Art: The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001), 66.

5. Erik Mona, "From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of *Dungeons & Dragons*," *in Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 25; Will Hindmarch, "Storytelling Games as a Creative Medium" in *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 47; Appelcline, 7; Ryan Dancey's 1999 *Adventure Game Industry Market Research Summary (RPGs) V1.0* found that two-thirds of tabletop role-players play *Dungeons & Dragons*. Kenneth Hite in the 2005 State of the Industry concluded that 50% of tabletop role-playing sales are *Dungeons & Dragons*.

6. Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*, 2nd edition. (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 3

7. Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures From Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012), 84.

8. Gygax himself named Howard, Leiber, de Camp, Pratt, and later on, Tolkien; Tresca (23) added Moorcock and Lovecraft.

9. Sarah Lynne Bowman. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity.* (Jefferson: McFarland & Companies, 2010), 1.

due to game mechanics, luck is deemphasized, while effort and courage are factors of success.[10]

Role-playing author and designer Michael J. Tresca traces the influence of American culture in-game even more explicitly:

> Dungeons & Dragons *is suffused with hope and power, with gold around every corner. Official campaign worlds for* Dungeons & Dragons *were slow to come about, instead encouraging game masters to create their own worlds in keeping with American individualism ... American fantasy games emphasized pulp-style action ...* Dungeons & Dragons *added pulp sensibilities to the fantasy game, an important part of American culture. Pulp fiction featured multitalented heroes, nonstop action, exotic locales, and nefarious villains.*[11]

Tresca adds that though *Dungeons & Dragons* "and its ilk are positioned as fantasy role-playing games limited only by the players' imagination, they are in fact bound by common principles that make fantasy role-playing games distinctly American." He recounts those principles as follows. The first is the notion of limitless growth for businesses, consumer buying power, and the economy. Second is the paradox of acquiring wealth seemingly at nobody's expense. The third principle is the axiomatic nature of good and evil. Finally, the Protestant ideals of success as a result of toil are reflected in the process of leveling up.[12] Gaming author and designer Lizzie Stark also draw parallels between leveling up and the American Dream, where the ideal immigrant enters the mythical land (USA) without resources, but is able to reach the top through hard work.[13]

Concerning *Dungeons & Dragons*'s use of non-American cultural elements, the purposes of this paper are served best by a textual example concerning Greek culture. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* boxed set, published in 1974, includes statistics for Medusae, Gorgons, Hydras, etc. These monsters remain a constant in future Monster Manuals, yet no mythical context is ever attributed to them: the themes of divine punishment, for example, or the concept of hubris, both of which were the origin of monsters in Greek antiquity, do not feature in the game. As a result, all entries in the *Monster Manual* have the same flavor, no matter their cultural origin. Peterson[14] pointedly explains how *Dungeons & Dragons* derived many monsters' details from T. H. White's *The Bestiary*, which comprised "a good introduction to European 'monstrous manuals,'" yet he also notes that Gygax's pulp sources direct "our attention to a body of literature flush with mythological trappings but nonetheless, qualitatively different in character from myths."[15]

World of Darkness

Scholarship has not analyzed World of Darkness's cultural influences as thoroughly, so a short textual analysis is required instead. Since each game line in World of Darkness—*Werewolf*, *Vampire*, *Mage* etc.—is based on different concepts and premises, this analysis remains limited to their common elements and general design.

World of Darkness' game texts explicitly state that differentiation from *Dungeons & Dragons* was one of the designers' goals.[16] Most of the elements that tabletop role-playing games scholars consider as indicative of *Dungeons & Dragon*'s American cultural identity appear to be mostly absent from the World of Darkness framework. Pulp style action is discouraged both via game mechanics[17] and textual admonitions. The blurring of the line between Good and Evil is presented as a core theme in all World of Darkness games, a fact reflected in the use of morality scales, such as "Humanity," "Wisdom," "Clarity," etc., and the use of both Virtues and Vices on character sheets. The "nonrandomness of lack" is also abolished through the use of dice pools.[18] Looting becomes irrelevant, as equipment confers few bonuses. Unlike *Dungeons & Dragon*'s pulp influences, the World of Darkness' Source Material sections include—among pop culture items—historical works, psychological treatises, and works of philosophy.

The World of Darkness' American gameframe can be located elsewhere in the text. The World of Darkness was initially conceived as an Anne Rice

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10. Gary Alan Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 76.

11. Michael Tresca. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games.* (Jefferson: McFarland & Companies, 2010), 16.

12. Tresca, 12-14.

13. Lizzie Stark, "Don't Touch or I'll Sue: American Larp as National Metaphor," Lizziestark.com, March 11, 2013, lizziestark.com/tag/american-dream-and-larp/.

14. Peterson, 154.

15. Peterson, 84.

16. See The Storyteller's Handbook (1992, 1997), 87, Vampire: the Masquerade (1998), 69, Dark Ages: Mage (2002), 103, etc.

17. Limited health levels, wound penalties, and long recuperating times discourage combat. Werewolf is an exception, reflected in the regeneration rules.

18. Dice pools suggest that even someone who has mastered a skill can underperform or even fail.

licensed game.[19] Furthermore, all game lines are connected with Universal Studios' "Universal Monsters"—Dracula, Frankenstein, the Wolf Man, and the Mummy—while most of its Source Material consists of pop culture items. The most noticeable element, though, is linked to cultural anthopologist's Adrie Suzanne's Kusserow's theory concerning the co-existence of individualism and sociocentrism in North America.[20] Player-characters in a World of Darkness game are greatly defined by their origins in a Clan, Tribe, or Tradition. At the same time, the player-character is encouraged to be individualistic.[21] Character roles are deliberately not complementary or balanced, while differences and rivalries between factions are overplayed. The prominence of individualism varies between games, but all World of Darkness games are permeated by the individualistic mentality referenced by Tresca.

Concerning foreign cultures, non-American cultural elements feature significantly in the World of Darkness' frame. Use of the "real" world as a setting resulted in a great number of supplements[22] detailing cities, countries, or continents outside North America. Textual analysis of the three major old World of Darkness games[23] showcases how, through emphasis on the historical past of Tribes, Clans, and Traditions, non-American cultures appear in 30% to 45% of the published material and their impact is presented as integral to role-playing. Separate game lines[24] cover the historical past and thus detail cultures and places outside the USA.

How these cultures are treated in-game varies. Helen of Troy as a *Vampire: the Masquerade* non-player character provides an example.[25] While Helen's actual myth explores a multiplicity of concepts,[26] *Vampire*'s Helen remains a plotting *femme fatale*. Similarly to Dungeons & Dragons' monsters, she is reduced to a mythological trapping. Later World of Darkness supplements, though, attempt to refine their approach to world cultures. *Constantinople by Night* (1996) eschewed stereotypes typically associated with Byzantium[27] for a more nuanced and historically correct approach of the Greek-influenced empire. Other textual artifacts remain ambiguous; in the *Victorian Age Vampire Companion*, nineteenth century Athens is mentioned as a city anachronistically ruled by a toga-clad madman. Whether the game resorts to stereotypical images of ancient Greece, or makes an insightful comment on the Greek preoccupation with the past in the wake of the newly established country's independence from the Ottoman Empire, is a matter for speculation.

Despite the appropriateness of the use of each element, the sum and depth of these references is such that the player is left with the impression of other cultures not as exotic flavorings, but as an actual part of the World of Darkness.

Cultural Elements of the Gaming Environment

Apart from the game texts, the role-playing experience is also informed by the cultural environment that influences and surrounds tabletop role-playing games. This cultural environment is shared between role-players worldwide. Among others, Pettersson, linguist and anthropologist Keith Winkler, and anthropologist Nicholas Mizer[28] have successfully demonstrated, through different angles, that even though every country has its own role-playing subculture, players and designers

19. Appelcline. 11.

20. Adrie Suzanne Kusserow, "De-Homogenizing American Individualism: Socializing Hard and Soft Individualism in Manhattan and Queens," *Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, 27, no. 2, (June 1999), 211-213.

21. A textual example is the "clans are not fraternities" slogan from *Vampire: the Masquerade*.

22. Vampire: the Masquerade sports 16 such supplements, while half of its modern-day adventures are set outside the USA. Old World of Darkness includes *Mage*, *Werewolf*, and new World of Darkness game lines include such material within the core rulebooks.

23. Drawn from the published material of *Vampire: the Masquerade*, *Mage: the Ascension,* and *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*.

24. Dark Ages and Victorian Ages for old *World of Darkness*, Dark Eras for new *World of Darkness*.

25. Helen appears in *Chicago by Night* (1993) and *Nights of Prophecy* (2000).

26. See Norman Austin's *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom* (Cornell University Press, 2008) and Laurie Maguire's *From Homer to Hollywood* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) for the extent of Helen's symbolic importance and the differentiation between the primary myth and the "profane" Helen.

27. Averil Cameron's *The Byzantines*, (London: Blackwell, 2006) records the predominance of superficial views on the Eastern Roman Empire.

28. W. Keith Winkler, "The Business and the Culture of Gaming," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler (Jefferson: McFarland & Companies, 2006), 147-9; Pettersson, "Nordic LARP and American Power," 2014; Nicholas Mizer, "No One Role-Plays the Spanish Inquisition!: The Early History of Role-Playing Games in Spain," in *The Wyrd Con 2013 Companion Book*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2013), 77-87.

also form a single, global subculture. Three major factors contribute to this globalization of the gaming subculture. The first factor, concerns the globally shared gaming texts. The second factor is the widespread use of the Internet, which simultaneously connects and informs players and game designers all over the world. The final factor is the importance of a shared pop culture, which greatly informs role-playing.

The role of pop culture merits further analysis, since role-playing scholarship has long established that pop culture informs character creation as well as actual play. Linguist Sean Hendricks showcases how popular culture creates a common frame of reference integral to the act of role-playing.[29] The ability to "enter" the world of one's favorite movies and novels is a major attraction of tabletop role-playing games; Mackay strongly establishes why players tend to draw their characters from pop culture both in a performative and a narrative sense, as well as the psychological and cultural importance of this act.[30] Furthermore, Bowman explicates the connection between tabletop role-playing games and the pop culture genres of horror, fantasy, and science-fiction,[31] a connection that Appelcline's exhaustive historical research further confirms.

Given the degree and depth of influence pop culture exerts on the role-playing experience, establishing its cultural identity becomes important to the current research question. Scholarship has long considered global pop culture to be Americanized, but debates exist concerning how this Americanization is perceived and negotiated by non-Americans. Campbell and Keane, as well as John Storey,[32] a major cultural studies scholar, strongly argue that cultural globalization is often perceived as being akin to Americanization and makes up a major part of the process itself. In addition, both fantasy and horror—the main influences on Dungeons & Dragons and World of Darkness respectively—are genres often criticized for their adherence to hegemonic values. These arguments, combined with the existence of an American gameframe within both games, suggest that the role-playing experience will unfold within American frames even for non-American gaming groups. Pettersson in particular demonstrates the ways in which the predominance of American popular culture marginalizes local cultural elements during the act of game design or actual play.[33]

However, despite the prominence of the above views on popular culture, further arguments tend towards social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's statement that "globalization is not the story of cultural homogenization."[34] The reason for this statement can be found in Storey's suggestion that, although "the availability of American culture worldwide is undoubted, how what is available is consumed is at the very least contradictory," which suggests that international consumers of popular culture do not consume passively. Such arguments suggest that pop culture, especially when providing escapism—as role-playing undoubtedly does—can be subversive instead of passive, or even, to quote Richard Maltby, "a gateway to our utopian selves."[35] These counter-arguments inform the present paper's initial hypothesis that players will attempt to navigate an American-influenced framework in order to express themselves.

As an addendum to the theoretical arguments, two phenomena that are unique to the tabletop role-playing game culture also point toward the possibility for negotiation.

The first phenomenon is related to the prominence of feedback. Before designing the new editions of their products,[36] the current publishers of both *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast) and World of Darkness (Onyx Path) formally requested suggestions and feedback from their player base, essentially making any fan with an Internet connection a possible co-writer. Onyx Path continues this trend through the Open Development concept,[37] which requests constant community feedback. While tabletop role-playing game design has always been a collaborative experience, this trend signifies a major departure from

29. Hendricks, Sean Q, "Incorporative Discourse Strategies in Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing Gaming," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games,* edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 50.

30. Mackay, 112-13.

31. Bowman, 1.

32. John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 6th edition (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 35; Campbell and Kean, 287-9.

33. Juhana Pettersson, "Nordic LARP and American Power," 2014.

34. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Univeristy of Minnesota Press, 2005), 11.

35. Storey, 35-6.

36. Ethan Gilsdorf, "Players Roll the Dice for *Dungeons & Dragons* Remake," *New York Times*, January 9, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/arts/video-games/dungeons-dragons-remake-uses-players-input.html?_r=2

37. Onyx Path Publishing, "Open Development News," OnyxPath.com, accessed December 6, 2015. http://theonyxpath.com/category/projects/open-development-projects/

the creative processes recorded by both Peterson and Appelcline, which up until now, involved only game designers and their immediate environment. World of Darkness' use of crowdfunding[38] is also a step towards this direction since, in most cases, backers get to choose the content.

The second phenomenon concerns the prominence of Nordic larp, which proves that role-playing can be adapted to suit specific cultural characteristics to the point where a new form of role-playing emerges. To summarize Juhana Pettersson's comments on Nordic larp, the term does not describe all larp taking place in the Nordic countries, nor is it geographically limited; Nordic larp is a specific game design movement characterized by ambitious projects that emphasize immersion and creativity. While the form is rooted in certain Nordic larp games, it has since been "exported" around the world.[39] Game researcher Jaakko Stenros defines Nordic larp as

> *A tradition that views larp as a valid form of expression, worthy of debate, analysis and continuous experimentation, which emerged around the Knutepunkt convention. It typically values thematic coherence, continuous illusion, action, and immersion, while keeping the larp co-creative and its production uncommercial. Workshops and debriefs are common."*[40]

Despite the debates associated with term,[41] the movement proves that upon contact with different cultures, it is possible for role-playing games to change into forms that differ from their initial design.

The scholarly arguments as well as the unique phenomena presented above suggest the possibility that players of tabletop role-playing games neither adopt "American" frameworks passively nor act independently of them; rather, they are likely to negotiate such elements during the act of role-playing. Fine has suggested that no matter the differences between settings created by individual game masters, tabletop role-playing games run according to a "world view that directs the game action and represents the implicit philosophy or ideals by which the world operates."[42] The game master incorporates a set of "folk ideas," which are integral parts of their own worldview. These folk ideas have to coexist with the cultural elements introduced in game design and game setting.

The Greek Connection

As seen above, scholarship on tabletop role-playing games has defined certain game elements as American, even though they do not necessarily represent the entirety of American culture. The same hazard is present in any attempt to pinpoint a coherent Greek cultural identity. For the purposes of this paper, it would be more useful to compare the elements already identified as American within *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness frameworks to corresponding cultural elements within Greek culture, in order to examine if Greek players are likely to treat this framework as alien to their own mindset.

To review, the elements identified as distinctly American by Tresca and Fine are the following: a) the idea of unlimited goods, b) the Good/Evil dichotomy, c) the Puritan ethic, d) the nonrandom nature of luck, e) the concept of individuality, and f) the pulp style action.

Beyond being foreign to Greek culture, these concepts are often antithetical. Political scientist Adamantia Pollis notes that while Hellenism thoroughly informs Western culture,[43] it is also true that the Ottoman rule isolated the country from the ideological currents that, along with classical antiquity, accompanied the rise of capitalism. Thus, Greek culture includes neither the idea of unlimited goods, which assumes that one person's gains are not another person's losses, nor the Puritan ethics that are further offset by the Greek Orthodox religion, which greatly informs Greek identity,[44] as well as the strong cultural belief (examined below) that intellect and luck are more important than hard work.

Similarly, the Good/Evil dichotomy and the concept of individuality are offset by the belief that community is paramount in Greece. Individuals are often judged as "good" according to their

38. As of August 31, 2015, the World of Darkness has crowdfunded 16 of its major releases since 2013.

39. Juhana Pettersson, "Introduction," *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*, edited by Juhana Pettersson, 7-9 (Helsinki, Finland: Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura, 2012), 8.

40. Jaakko Stenros, "What Does Nordic Larp Mean?" *Nordic Larp Talks*, April 17 2013. http://nordiclarptalks.org/what-does-nordic-larp-mean-jaakko-stenros/.

41. Petersson, "Nordic," 2014

42. Fine, 76.

43. Adamantia Pollis, "Greek National Identities: Religious Minorities, Rights and European Norms," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 10, no. 2 (October 1992): 176.

44. Anna Babali, "The Construction of the National Identity of Modern Greece and its Impact on Music," Paper presented at *LSE: European Institute 2007*, 10. http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/research/hellenicObservatory/Events/HO%20PhD%20Symposia/3rdSymposium/phd07_Papers.aspx.

contribution in a community instead of according to a moral code separating Good from Evil.[45]

Finally, the concept of the nonrandom nature of luck remains antithetical to the importance attached to luck or fate by the Greeks, the degree of which is showcased amply in numerous ways, i.e. by professor of comparative literature and philosophy Lisa Raphals' linguistic analysis[46] or historian Samuel Sambursky's social one.[47]

The final element—the pulp style action and the violence implied within—does not appear to be antithetical to Greek culture, even though within said culture intellect tends to be is prioritized above physical strength; indeed, it is considered a primary virtue.[48]

As an addendum, one of the concepts that Tresca identified as "American" within *Dungeons & Dragons*—the ease of looting ancient, lost civilizations—clashes directly with Greek culture. Not only is the idea of a continuous past basic to Greek identity,[49] but the country has long been a victim of colonization and expansion. Since history informs identity, most Greeks will not view such tactics positively as their negative consequences are constantly stressed in education and culture.

45. Pollis, 172

46. Lisa Raphals, " Fate, Fortune, Chance, and Luck in Chinese and Greek: A Comparative Semantic History," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 4 (Oct., 2003): 537-574.

47. Samuel Sambursky, "On the Possible and Probable in Ancient Greece," *Osiris* 12 (1956): 48.

48. Sandra L. Schulz, "Greeks in America and Greece: The 42-Cent Difference," *Phylon* 42, no. 4 (4th Qtr., 1981): 386.

49. Peter Mackridge, "Cultural Difference as National Identity in Modern Greece," in *Hellenisms: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity from Antiquity to Modernity,* edited by Katerina Zacharia (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2008), 7.

Table 1: American cultural elements vs. Greek cultural elements.

American Cultural Elements	**Greek Cultural Elements**
The idea of unlimited goods	One person's gain is another person's loss
Good/Evil dichotomy	"Good" and "Evil" are defined according to their impact on one's community
Puritan ethic	Emphasis on intellect and luck over hard work/ absence of ideological trends accompanying capitalism in the West / Greek orthodox religion
Non-random nature of luck	Emphasis on luck/fate
Emphasis on individuality	Emphasis on community
Pulp style, violent action	No antithetical value, yet emphasis on intellectual virtues
The past as distinct from the present	Direct, continuous link to the past

The Case Study

Method

The case study as research method has been used widely in role-playing studies, e.g., Tresca, Fine, Mackay. The group used to test the research hypothesis is the author's Greek gaming group of 15 years. It consists of 10 males and 8 females, aged 25 to 45. The following charts provide relevant demographic data for the participants.

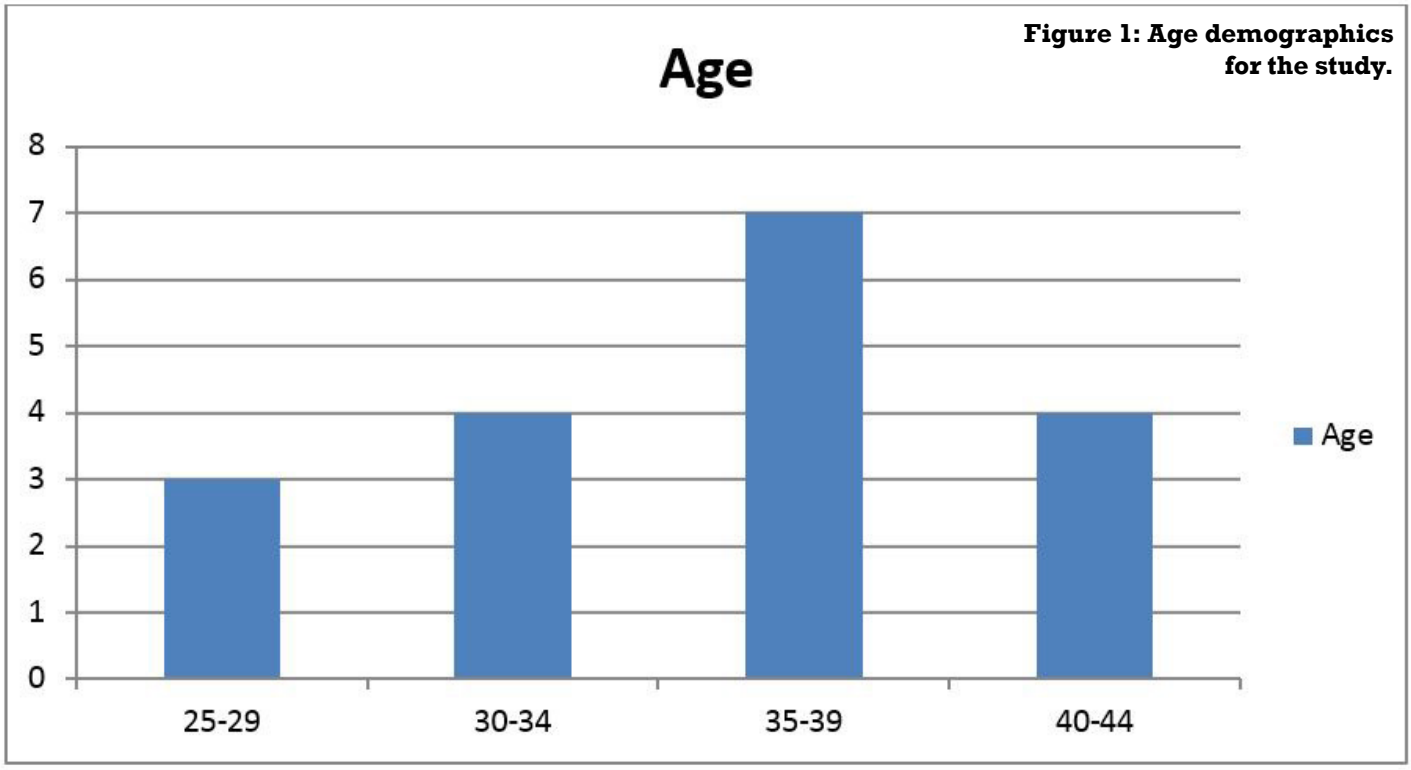


Figure 1: Age demographics for the study.

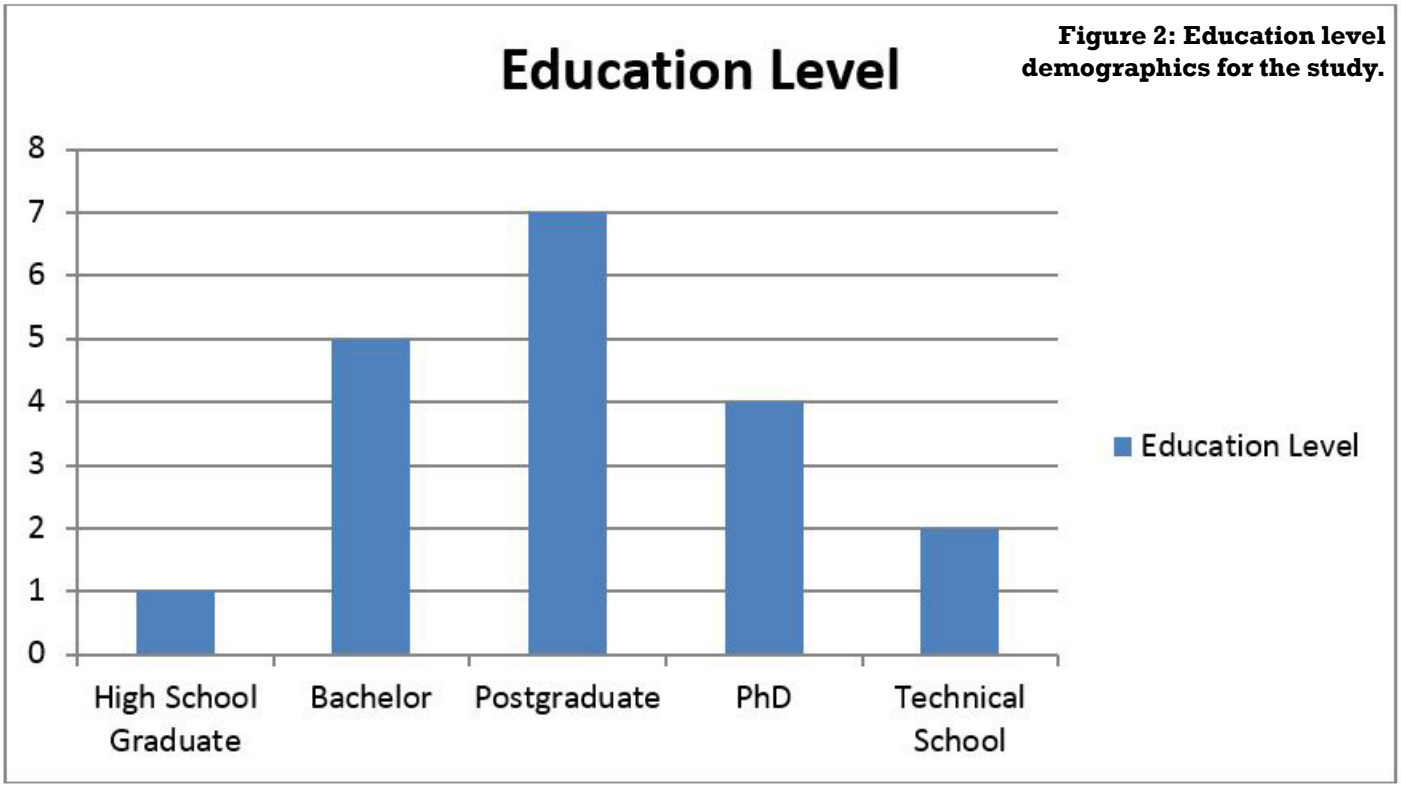


Figure 2: Education level demographics for the study.

All respondents have created a minimum of four different characters during their experience with role-playing games. All participate in both *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness games. Only two claim to enjoy both games equally, while the rest are equally split between *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness. The preferred World of Darkness games are *Vampire*, *Mage*, and *Werewolf* regardless of edition—i.e. "old" or "new" World of Darkness—as well as new World of Darkness's *Changeling: the Lost*.

The initial hypothesis is that international players need to negotiate American-influenced frameworks within *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness in order to successfully fulfill the self-expression function of the game. A secondary goal includes determining the gameframe that would provide the least resistance to this attempt.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. However, two questions within the interview were structured more rigidly, with one of them making use of a Likert scale. Finally, the interview had elements of a survey as the players needed to recount their characters and the inspiration behind them. The author of the paper is a member of this group and was able to cross-examine respondent statements.

Finally, the respondents were not initially aware of the research question. So as not to influence their answers, only the final part of the interview addressed whether the players ever felt the games' American cultural frame posed issues during the act of role-playing.

Results

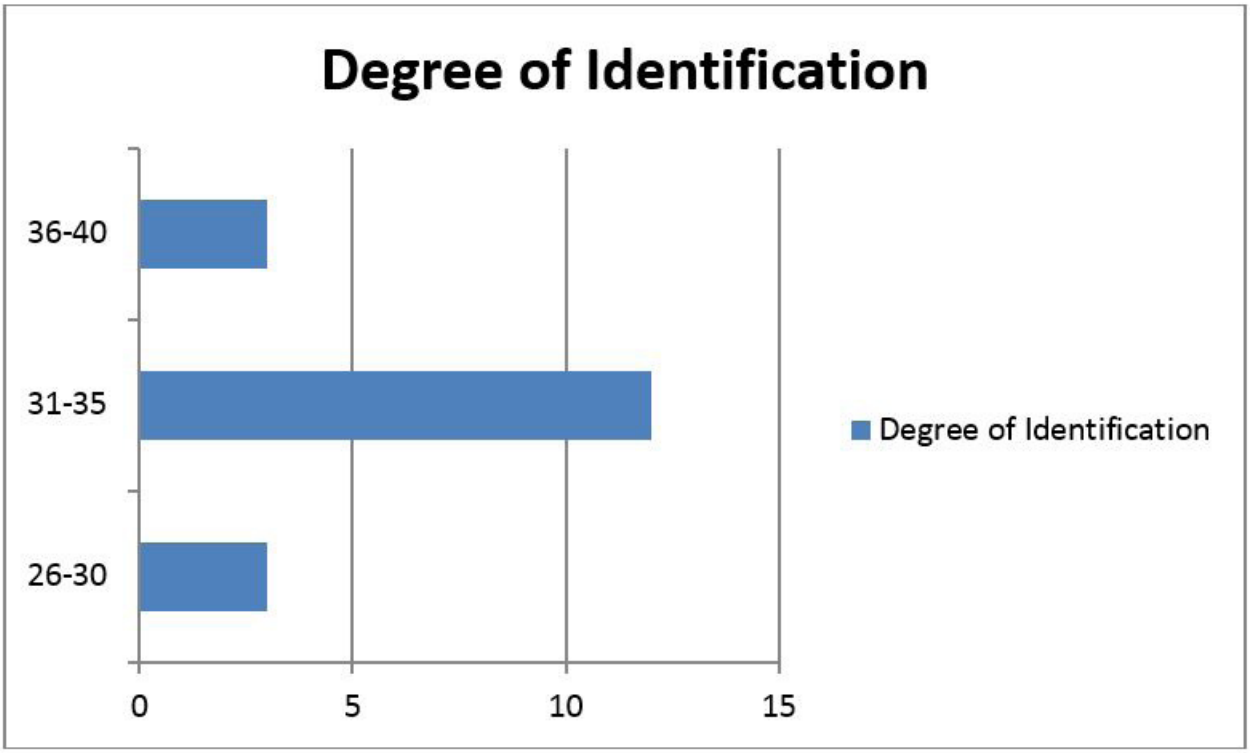
The first section of the interview aimed at ensuring that the elements designated as American within the scholarship of tabletop role-playing games were indeed perceived as foreign by the respondents.

The question made use of a 5-tiered Likert scale. The respondents were asked to state their degree of agreement with 8 statements related to the cultural elements inherent in tabletop role-playing gameframes, which were found to be contradictory to the Greek cultural elements. The questions were phrased so as to avoid acquiescence bias.[50]

According to their surveys, all respondents identified more strongly with the Greek point of view, as shown in the following chart. Out of a total score of 40 on the Likert scale, 15 participants scored above 30 while the remaining 3 scored above 27.

50. According to Alyson Holbrook in the *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods* (2008), acquiescence response bias is "the tendency for survey respondents to agree with statements regardless of their content. Acquiescence response bias could influence any question in which the response options involve confirming a statement, but it may be particularly problematic with agree-disagree questions," 3.

Figure 3: Degree of identification. Scores above 20 signify agreement with the cultural elements perceived as Greek.



The second question examined whether the respondents were interested in including these "Greek" traits in their games. For this purpose, players were asked to choose between 9 different traits for a future player-character (PC). 61% chose exclusively Greek-oriented traits, despite such traits not being integral to the gameframe as defined above, 28% chose mostly Greek traits, and only 11% (2 respondents) chose non-Greek traits. The players did not wish to differentiate between PCs meant for World of Darkness and PCs meant for *Dungeons & Dragons*, even when given the chance to do so.

An examination of each respondent's four major PCs[51] proved that their answers mostly correspond to their actual gaming choices. Only 11% prioritized other in-game traits than the traits they declared as preferable.

Finally, when asked whether they felt that certain personal characteristics had to be left outside the gaming table, nobody identified one of the "Greek" traits as undesirable.

The second section of the interview examined the inspiration behind PCs and the influence of Greek and American cultural elements and imagery on the act of role-playing. Apart from examining the role of pop culture as stated in the literature review above, this section is meant to provide data to be used in conjunction with the findings in section three.

The respondents were initially asked about the inspiration behind their player characters. 70% declared themselves to be inspired by pop culture elements such as books, TV series, MMOs, comics, and movies. However, an examination of their PCs shows this percentage to be much higher: around 89%.[52] Other influences mentioned included history and "literary fiction." 100% of the respondents stated that they were also influenced by personal issues that they needed to explore. The setting was also named as a major influence in 83% of the respondents.

It appears that 95% of the respondents enjoy Greek mythology and folklore. Following that, the respondents were asked whether they recalled a satisfactory depiction of Greece in pop culture. 100% answered negatively. Any attempt to depict Greek myth, folklore, or even modern events was dismissed as hyperbolic, out of proportion, and far away from the original intent of the source material. Similarly, the use of actual mythical Greek elements within tabletop role-playing games was equally dismissed (100%), though the use of historical elements met with more approval (55%).

Only 3 out of 18 respondents had role-played a Greek or Greek-inspired character.[53] Out of the rest, 83% (66% of the total) stated that they were not opposed to the idea, but that the opportunity had not appeared yet, even if they had been role-playing for more than a decade.

Two possible reasons for not having played or not wanting to play a Greek character were given. The first was escapism and the desire to portray something outside everyday life. The second reason mentioned the incompatibility between the setting and Greek imagery/identity, as well the absence of Greek cultural elements from the genres informing the game settings.

The final section of the interview aimed at examining openly whether the players considered the American gameframes of *Dungeons & Dragons* or World of Darkness as obstacles during the act of role-playing. In case of a positive response, the aim was to examine the ways in which players deal with such an obstacle.

The above question was stated directly. The majority (95%) had observed this issue and identified several components of the game that they identified as foreign, as well as gameframe elements that forced them to act outside their own culture during actual play. At the same time, they universally argued that it was in the hands of the storytellers and players to remove these elements and suit both the narration and the performance to their own culture. Additionally, 89% of the respondents stated that they expected the framework to be there and were prepared to negotiate with it. Finally, 89% of the respondents opined that even if they were to be influenced by the gameframe initially, immersion would eventually take the game into a direction closer to their own cultural paradigm. Their claims were verified by the character survey. As an addendum, the respondents were questioned about what they enjoyed most in *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness respectively. This question aimed at examining whether the attraction to these tabletop role-playing games was directly related to the "American" gameframe. A secondary goal included coming up with a tabletop role-playing game that would be attractive, but also would not impede self-expression.

The diversity of settings and the opportunity for exploration emerged as a common attraction between nearly all respondents. 95% enjoyed this element in *Dungeons & Dragons*, while 100% praised World of Darkness for permitting exploration of the real world.

51. Defined as PCs created for long-term campaigns and played for more than a year.

52. Again, based on four major characters.

53. Concerning this question, the character survey deliberately leaves out two short campaigns set in Greece, as they players had no choice as to what nationality they would play.

The rest of the answers varied widely, but only a negligible percentage of these responses correlated directly to the gameframe elements identified in the literature review.

Discussion

Reflecting upon the participants' individual responses facilitates the final conclusion on the initial research question.

Concerning whether players would be interested in expressing their own cultural identity, a paradox seems to have emerged. Respondents were interested in role-playing elements of their cultural identity, but did not appear interested in role-playing Greeks, even when stating otherwise. The reasoning behind the negative responses provides some explanation. 72% offered that the game was meant to provide escapism, and playing a Greek character would negate that, taking away the opportunity to try something new. Similarly, another player stated that Greece was too close to reality for imagination to be "ignited." However, nearly all respondents made it clear that *Dungeons & Dragons* was obviously based on a different mythology, and any Greek character would be out of place. Pop culture was also provided as an explanation; one respondent offered that through video games, books, and movies, we end up being more familiar with Anglo-Saxon imagery than with Greek mythical imagery when it comes to battles, heroes, and adventures. Similarly, another respondent opined that it is harder for people who are genre fans to play a Greek character, since they enter tabletop role-playing games already familiar with what fantasy and horror "should" look like; alternately, this respondent, as someone not acquainted with the genres, found it easier to imagine himself as the character he would like to play. It appears then that two different factors—escapism and lack of relevant pop culture imagery—make it uninteresting for the respondents to role-play their ethnicity.

Concerning whether respondents find their self-expression impeded by the "American" gameframe introduces another paradox. 95% of the respondents were conscious of such a gameframe. Interestingly, the elements respondents reported as "foreign" were not always those suggested by scholars. Their remarks can be separated in two different sections. One section concerns elements inherent in the gameframe and the second concerns ways in which the players feel forced to act either because of the gameframe, or because of the role-playing games' connection to pop culture. Remarks in the first section include: a) the lack of the sense of "measure" and moderation in *Dungeons & Dragons*; b) the competitiveness and aggressive individuality of *World of Darkness*; c) the oversimplification of rules; d) the oversimplified way of handling diversity and religion, often as non-existent issues; e) the political elements, e.g., the villainous "Red Wizards" as a comment on the USSR; f) the dungeon crawl; g) NPCs being either villainous or flawless; and h) the fact that since tabletop role-playing games are created by members of one culture, every attempt to depict a different culture was either misguided or ended up conveying a common feeling under different trappings.

Remarks in the second section include: a) the fact that players often have to revert to speaking English to retain the pop culture trappings; b) the fact that the format resembles movies and comics so much that players find themselves imitating speech patterns found in movies, comics, pop culture, etc.; and c) the pulp settings force character creation to follow suit.

However, despite consciously recognizing the existence of an American gameframe, all respondents made it clear that the above elements did not ultimately alienate them or impede their game. Three reasons were given for this. The first reason, which was suggested by 100% of the respondents, was that the mood of any given campaign is less the result of the game itself and more a decision made by the storyteller and players. For this reason, 83% of the participants prefer gaming in homebrew settings. The third reason, suggested by 89% of the participants, was that respondents were more or less expecting the gameframe to be there, since they are familiar with American culture. The storyteller was again entrusted with removing any elements that would not fit with the group's culture. A final reason, which was suggested by 89% of the respondents, was that even when they began playing influenced by foreign cultural elements, they eventually left those behind. This included both performative and narrative parts of role-playing; on the issue of performativity, players suggested that they began acting according to pop culture tropes, even speaking English instead of Greek and using movie-inspired catchphrases and slogans. Narratively, the background of their characters and the initial storylines also followed genre standards. Eventually, though, respondents reported that the performance stopped being imitative and the narration adapted to the group's interests. Sooner or later, the need for self-expression surfaced and took the character to a different direction than the source material indicated. For most, immersion was a major factor; they suggested that the more immersed a player is in the game, the more easily the trappings are abandoned.

The first two reasons the respondents suggested cannot be verified within the limits of this case study. However, the third claim can be partly examined through the respondents' PCs. In some cases, while

a player's earlier characters are more consistent with the game's standards, eventually more elaborate characters were created. In most cases, though, the change happens within each game. While many characters begin as clichés, the respondents found that their eventual in-game actions did not fit with the initial concept. When this observation was pointed out, the reasoning was that the group dynamics and the storyteller's scenarios would make the initial concept unplayable. This remark is consistent with the first claim: that the storytellers and players set the mood.

The paradox then emerges out of the respondents' answers is this: even though they deny being impeded by the immediately noticeable American gameframe, they do acknowledge almost always creating characters, performances, and narrations that adhere to that frame, knowing that they will eventually need to depart from them.

Finally, concerning the benefits that the respondents find more attractive in a tabletop role-playing game, one answer provided a common thread in all responses. The foray into fantastical worlds and the sense of exploration and adventure was stated as a main attraction of *Dungeons & Dragons* for 95% of the respondents, while 80% of them opined that "visiting" different places allowed them to explore different sides of themselves. At the same time, World of Darkness was praised by 100% of the respondents for allowing players to "explore" the real world. 89% of the respondents reported that using the real world as a backdrop allowed for characters that provided them with more opportunities for personal expression. Still, the emphasis on gloominess and infighting repels some players; the geographical setting is more diverse but since the mood is "set in stone", the issues persist (one respondent noted that nationality makes no difference as long as you are a citizen of the World of Darkness). The new version of World of Darkness was praised for providing a "toolbox" instead of a set mood. It appears then that a true diversity of settings unlimited by tropes and an actual opportunity for exploration are major attractions of role-playing games. Interestingly, this benefit is not anchored to the gameframe identified as "American."

Conclusion

The above results suggest that players identify an American gameframe as well as the need to negotiate with it during the act of role-playing. The case study's gaming group appears to subscribe to certain cultural beliefs that oppose *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness's American gameframe. They also consider self-expression as a basic goal of role-playing. However, during character creation, the majority initially adopts performative elements and narrations identified as American, both consciously and unconsciously. Both the game setting and the prevalence of pop culture appear to influence this decision directly. Only during the actual act of role-playing do the participants eventually subvert the American gameframe by deviating performatively and narratively from the initial concept. Even though this process is identified and not considered as a disruption, its existence suggests that the freedom ostensibly provided during character creation is essentially narrowed down.

A Proposition

The naturally emerging question is whether the possibility of expanding this freedom within the current frames of *Dungeons & Dragons* and World of Darkness exists. While many newer tabletop role-playing games are less limiting, it is likely that these two games will remain influential. A possible answer does not appear to lie in the use of the players' own culture as a game setting, since players appear to consider this practice as an inhibition of the escapism function.

Another route is suggested through the interviews. Respondents in their entirety identified the variety of possible settings as the primary benefit of tabletop role-playing games, as well as a trait directly related to personal expression. Given that setting informs character creation, it is possible that by publishing settings that are genuinely diverse instead of appropriating trappings—even within the current gameframes—initial players' choices could be less limited than they currently appear to be. Another possibility would be the emphasis on well-designed "tool boxes" that genuinely encourage storytellers to create their own settings. Given that player choices are also informed by pop culture, a change within tabletop games alone would only be one small step toward this direction. However, given that genre and role-playing games inform each other, the increase of creative diversity even within well-established frames could eventually benefit both.

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in Role-playing Games" was presented in the Fairytale Vanguard Conference at the University of Ghent. She is the chief editor of the AVATON *and* mystery *magazines in Greece, and has contributed to numerous history books. Nikolaidoi is co-author of* 50 Women Who Changed the World *(Archetypo Publications).*

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APPENDIX A

Interview & Survey Questions

Name:
Age:
Sex:
Level of Education:
Profession:
Gaming Experience:
Favorite Game:
Name four of your most important long-played characters:

Section One

How strongly do you agree with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree?

a) In a conflict, more often than not there is no good and evil, but only sides
b) After a point, growth and acquisition of wealth happens at the expense of someone else
c) Communal happiness is more important than individual happiness
d) Effort is the shortest route to success
e) A strong sense of the past makes for a stronger present and future
f) Prevailing in a conflict is of the utmost importance
g) Being lucky is the one of the most important traits you can have
h) Being intelligent is one of the most important traits you can have

If you where to create a character for an ongoing campaign, which traits would you pick as important to them?

a) Mental Prowess
b) Being the person to make a difference to your people
c) Acquiring wealth
d) Being independent
e) Being lucky
f) Acquiring status and recognition
g) Being on the morally correct side
h) Being loyal to your origins
i) Being on the winning side

Which is the personal trait you have to set aside more often when creating a PC?

Section Two

What usually inspires you to create your character?

Do you enjoy Greek mythology and folk stories?

Have you ever role-played a character of Greek origins or inspired by Greek culture?

Can you think of any instance of Greek culture being successfully expressed in pop culture?

Can you think of any instance of Greek culture being successfully expressed in tabletop role-playing games?

Would you be interested in playing in a Greek setting? How comfortable would you be playing a Greek inspired character in Dungeons & Dragons/ World of Darkness?

Section Three

Have you ever thought of the game as a product of American culture?

Has that influenced you during actual play?

Section Four

What are World of Darkness' greater benefits?

What are Dungeons & Dragon's greater benefits?

Bodies and Time in Tabletop Role-Playing Game Combat Systems

Evan Torner

Abstract

This article examines combat systems across many tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) as discursive objects sharing a common thread: they follow the model of *Dungeons & Dragons* by creating an experience of "special time" in which the object of the game suddenly becomes the elimination of the opponents' bodies, which are quantified as hit points. Using a cultural studies framework, the piece contends that this core combat experience is fundamentally ideological, ingrained in the TRPG medium, and delivers a specific affect around the variable waiting for the bodies of others to disappear so that other types of play can continue. In this respect, the paper demonstrates how we might look at how TRPGs manage player time, represent bodies, manage affect, and reward specific types of meta-play.

Introduction

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) underpin much of the logic of modern digital and analog games.[1] Joris Dormans describes them as "rule-based simulation 'engines' that facilitate playful interaction."[2] In this respect, the importance of *design*,[3] particularly its propositional qualities, has been underrated in the study of tabletop games in general. *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*, 1974, 2014) is undoubtedly accorded a much vaunted pole position among TRPGs, for since 1974, it has stood as a metonym for the hobby of role-playing itself. It remains the undisputed top game on the market and models what a "role-playing game" looks like to millions of individuals.[4]

Important questions emerge: *how* do the procedures of TRPGs such as D&D help players construct meaning and what are the ideological overtones of these procedures? Recent analyses have assessed the impact of RPGs on players' identity, behavior and social milieu.[5] But these studies often gloss over the "simulation engines" governing much of the players' options during the game and the paratexts that frame these engines.[6] This study constitutes an attempt at such a simulation engine analysis of one of the most frequently encountered subsystems in TRPGs: physical combat. Based on a reading of numerous TRPG rules texts, I have concluded that the combat subsystem has been granted a privileged mechanical and ontological position in TRPG play, that it produces itself, and that players of TRPGs are affectively positioned as desiring the reduction of the bodies of their opponents to nothing, rendering ambivalent the human experience with death.

Experiences of *Dungeons & Dragons* Combat

My analysis begins with the deconstruction of two textual artifacts. One is a blog post from April 1, 2009 on *Geek's Dream Girl*,[7] "4 Ways to Speed Up *D&D* Combat." The four ways described are for the dungeon master to "(1) use traps ... (2) don't fight to the death ... (3) use minions ... [and (4) initiate] combat

1. Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars People and Fantastic Adventures From Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012).

2. Joris Dormans, "On the Role of the Die: A Brief Ludologic Study of Pen-and-Paper Roleplaying Games and Their Rules" *Game Studies* 6, no. 1 (December 2006): http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans. Corroborating this point of view is also Jaakko Stenros, *Playfulness, Play and Games: A Constructionist Ludology Approach* (Ph.D. diss. Tampere University, 2015); Karl Jones Bergström. *Playing for Togetherness: Designing for Interaction Rituals Through Gaming* (Ph.D. diss. University of Gothenburg, 2012).

3. Greg Costikyan and Drew Davidson, eds., *Tabletop Analog Game Design* (Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2011), 14.

4. W. Keith Winkler, "The Business and Culture of Gaming," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 147.

5. See Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

6. Drawing on Gerard Genette's notion of paratext, or text that frames the primary text, David Jara proposes a way in which we can interpret game fiction, art, and mechanics as ideological texts. David Jara, "A Closer Look at the (Rule-)Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-Playing Games," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013): 39-54.

7. Guest Writer, "4 Ways to Speed up D&D Combat," *Geek's Dream Girl*, accessed February 10, 2012. http://geeksdreamgirl.com/2009/04/01/4-ways-to-speed-up-dd-combat/.

according to plot."[8] On the point of "using traps," the anonymous author elaborates symptomatically:

> *Replacing a few monsters in a combat with traps and hazards decreases the number of hit points the party needs to slog through. Simplistic traps like crossbow turrets make up the extra damage lost from an additionally [sic] creature, but can be deactivated or avoided without needing to work through so many hit points.*

The uninitiated reader would be hard pressed to decipher what simulating conflict between people has to do with the auxiliary task of "[slogging]" or "working" through hit points. The utterance presumes the reader knows that the major time commitment in a TRPG is not actually playing a role *per se*, but a series of dice rolls made by each player in turn to see if chance allows his/her character to potentially reduce the hit points of an opponent to zero. The tension produced by this procedure lies in the randomized[9] potential for their opponents to reduce their character's hit points to zero instead. In end effect, however, what frequently occurs is a drawn-out stream of misses and hits that do not so much contribute to the narrative or emotional commitments at hand, but instead enact a form of ritualized fictional labor. Enemies' bodily integrity—represented by a number—prevent players from advancing their characters. Though player-characters' lives ostensibly hang in the balance during combat, the threat itself appears to be boundlessly replaceable: a crossbow turret could substitute for an angry creature or ill-intentioned thug, especially as an inanimate object that the players might "deactivate" or "avoid" so as to not engage the combat subsystems that would otherwise drain time from a session. If games are, as Bernard Suits argues, mere "voluntary attempts to overcome unnecessary obstacles,"[10] why does one volunteer to an inconvenient obstacle?

In fact, all four of the author's game tips can be productively deconstructed in the fashion above. "Use traps" actually means one should give player-characters a chance to avoid combat rules while still threatening them with harm; "don't fight to the death" means that the dungeon master should set a substantially smaller number of hit points required to remove an enemy's combat effectiveness; "use minions" means one should not only set a smaller number of hit points, but make the enemy's lives seem less consequential; and "combat according to plot" means make affective and narrative appeals that then justify the use of the combat system. The slippages of this text suggest that combat as a subsystem of a larger TRPG system is a time-consuming task. Nevertheless, the author naturalizes combat's existence and procedures, preferring to change the fiction in terms of character priorities and number of traps instead of changing the very subsystem that monopolizes so much time.

My other textual artifact illustrates the emergent arbitrariness of TRPG combat as social practice. In his writings on his teenage experience with *D&D*, U.S. comedian Patton Oswalt sarcastically describes players of the game as "gamblers at 3 a.m. [living] on the internal rush and collapse that come from the flip of a card, a ball falling into a slot, dice resting on felt."[11] Here Oswalt highlights the primacy of chance in determining the outcomes of diegetic conflict, long a subject of debate in TRPG circles. Combat is the primary test of a character's competence in an RPG, yet paradoxically relies on randomness. In the game *Everway* (2005), Jonathan Tweet calls TRPGs task resolution models that rely on randomness Fortune (results based on chance), as opposed to Karma (results based on fixed values and expenditure of pools to succeed) and Drama (a player simply says what happens). This over-reliance on chance compromises player agency with a competent character.[12] Oswalt's commentary underscores the degree to which the vicarious "rush" of physical conflict is tied to randomizers ordinarily associated with bets placed on probabilities, rather than the ostensible play agendas[13] of those gathered around the table. Finally, Oswalt's description of the late hour of play denotes the protracted engagement of combat mechanics—the "grind"—that serves as the bread and butter of most role-playing experiences. McKenzie

8. Ibid.

9. On players' ambivalent experiences of randomness, see: John Kaufeld, "Randomness, Player Choice, and Player Experience," in *Tabletop Analog Game Design*, edited by Greg Costikyan and Drew Davidson (Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2011), 33-39.

10. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Calgary: Broadview Press, 2005), 54.

11. Patton Oswalt, *Zombie Spaceship Wasteland* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 73.

12. Tweet paraphrased in Ron Edwards, "System Does Matter," last modified January 28 2004. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/11/

13. Here I am using the model of creative (play) agendas proposed by Forge Theory, best explained in Emily Care Boss, "Key Concepts in Forge Theory," in *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Jyväskylä: Ropecon, 2008), 232-233.

Wark refers to the "grind levels" of a game—those that require repetitive tasks over a fairly predictable amount of time in order to advance—as those where "time is measured in discrete and constant units." [14] Not surprisingly, combat itself is the most frequent grind activity in both computer RPGs and TRPGs. Suspending time lures many gamers toward TRPG play in the first place, even if the suspense itself wears off after a while.

A Proposition

Game design choices and non-choices (automatisms) affect the lives of thousands of players and their relationship to their imaginary worlds.[15] My proposition is to take the procedures of given TRPG systems as serious objects of academic study, and to view role-playing experiences at least partially as textual products of ritualized patterns in game design, such as the traditional combat subsystems I discuss here. Though many academic conversations about the phenomenology of the TRPG experience revolve around immersion, the performance of roles and identity, I argue that the simple procedures of play—particularly simulated combat—determine a sizable portion of the affect of any given TRPG experience,[16] regardless of whether or not the group in question strongly identifies with their characters or rigorously adheres to the prescribed rules or not.[17]

This article provisionally examines several divergent TRPG combat systems[18] with respect to D&D in terms of their ramifications for play and affect. If we define affect as the mood backdrop from which emotions emerge, then combat systems in TRPGs typically presume moods of excitement and tension. Yet, I contend that such systems organize time and bodies—both diegetic and non-diegetic—in fashions counterproductive to this intended affective goal. Combat easily becomes repetitive, inconsequential, and occasionally inhuman, part of an alienated labor and attention economy that subsumes the players.[19] I support this contention with a discourse analysis of TRPG texts informed by a few modest theories of chance, affect, bodies, and time.[20] This humanities-based methodology interrogates the premises of game rules, such that the social text—i.e., actual play—that a given game produces can then be read against the grain.

Through this discourse analysis, I highlight the way in which combat systems (A) reflect historically and culturally specific modes of game design; (B) presume a sense of "being-in-time" that is then negotiated by the eventual player groups; (C) often problematically abstract the topoi of the human body and corporeality as a result; (D) explore arbitrary failure-to-perform rather than the unfolding fiction at hand; and (E) promote aggressive meta-play that tends to overwhelm other affective systems at the table, unless the designers of the game in question have polemically adopted a counter-tradition to the normative, turn-based, hit-point-attrition-derived modes of combat procedure derived from D&D. TRPGs of note drawn from the last forty years of gaming will be discussed. My purpose here is not

14. McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press), 51.

15. See for example the explicit focus on rules, systems, and subsystems presented by Aki Järvinen. *Games Without Frontiers: Theories and Methods for Game Studies and Design* (Ph.D. diss., University of Tampere, 2008). See also Frans Mäyrä, *An Introduction to Game Studies* (New York: Sage, 2008).

16. Bowman argues that tactical combat itself can produce or reflect a dissociative state, in which every action now takes on a special meaning. Bowman, 113-115.

17. According to the "lumpley principle" theorized by Vincent Baker, rules can only form part of the "system" that governs a given RPG group's behavior. System is therefore merely "the means by which the group agrees to imagined elements during play." See: Boss, 235.

18. For the sake of brevity and viability, my study includes only so-called TRPG combat and excludes live-action, video game, and other perfectly legitimate sites of RPG combat. This is due to questions of scale and that the inclusion of the corporeal body (live-action) or recursive digital algorithms (video games) are, in fact, factors that have a significant impact on the way combat works.

19. "Alienated labor" I define as human time and effort devoted in service to an abstract system or ideal that primarily benefits that abstract system or ideal in exchange for meager, abstract compensation. It actually deprives the laborer of the time and effort that could be applied to another task. The attention economy revolves around work by Jonathan Beller on the cinema, namely "value-producing human attention" (5), in that the viewer/player's attention can be bundled into units of value to be monitored and traded for profit. Combat systems based around the "traditional" *D&D* model specifically bundle attention so that the primary ritualistic emphasis of a game centers on combat encounters, which weapons and monsters in future supplements are most readily able to address. See Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006).

20. Discourse analysis, based on models such as that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), uses the given impermanence of language (and the game rules that language governs) to reveal slippages between social reality and fantasies. All RPG systems are created in relation to other existing alternatives of narrative, including those found in other interactive and passive media at the time. By a similar token, ideal audiences and actual audiences heavily shape language used and its preferred interpretations.

to discuss the seminal nor even the most influential in TRPG design, but to illustrate by example the different interventions several games make in terms of simulating violent combat, as well as suggest their regulatory and philosophical functions in play.

Combat as an Autopoietic System

Systems are not neutral objects, mere "tools" to be used by human beings. On the contrary, tools also use their human users as well. As Kevin Kelly argues, technologies are organisms desirous of certain human inputs.[21] TRPGs are social technologies that require specific human inputs and only certain outputs from the game system can be construed as "game-like." This produces game design patterns, which Staffan Björk and Jussi Holopainen call "recurrent game mechanics or elements of interaction in games, either intentional or emergent."[22] Patterns then prompt specific user interactions that, when coherently assembled, become a ludic experience known as a "game." The game at the site of play by users then becomes a social text, synchronizing feedback mechanisms with the negotiated fictions and social realities.[23]

Combat exhibits patterns of game design that segment time into a potentially infinite series of individual rounds, encourage manipulation of probability to avoid failure, and promote the use of hit points as means of timing the fight and threatening the player-character. However, to be blunt, traditional TRPG combat is also a ritual that dominates significant portions of the overall play experience,[24] occurring mostly at the level of what Jennifer Grouling Cover defines as the "game frame" over the "social frame" or the "narrative frame."[25] Its implementation requires copious amounts of time, patience and familiarity with the rules. By way of this implementation, gamers thereby invest much symbolic weight in the procedures and outcome of any given fight. The return on this investment, of course, is presumably the excitement that one experiences in the midst of a life-and-death battle, the vicarious adrenaline rush of a randomizer—dice—combined with a high stakes outcome—potential character death. Though actual combat rules usually dominate only about 8% of a TRPG core rulebook's text,[26] attributes and explanations pertaining to combat perfuse the rest of it. Indeed, combat in TRPGs is so ingrained that it constitutes an "autopoietic system," a "recursively stabilized functional mechanism, which remains stable even when its genesis and mode of functioning has been revealed," as defined by Niklas Luhmann.[27] Whereas video games are not necessarily autopoietic, as they require continuous player input to initiate their feedback loops,[28] TRPG combat systems, or at least their texts, seem to continuously reproduce themselves in publishing and play behavior: turn-taking, rolling, missing, or hit-point deducting with quick bits of creative narration ("I roundhouse kick the goblin behind me out of the cattle car!") or procedural narration ("You miss.") in between. Unless conscious design efforts are made to even loosen its hold, its logic systems will continue to hold sway over future works in the medium.

Combat's autopoeisis, its long-term recursive stabilization, has to do with its sociocultural context and presumed affective appeal. The former is easy to explain: wages in the game-writing industry are generally low,[29] and combat information is fairly cheap for all involved to produce across supplements and publications. Writers dutifully fill word counts

21. Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

22. Staffan Björk and Jussi Holopainen, *Patterns in Game Design* (Waltham, MA: Charles River Media, 2006). See also Whitson John Kirk III, *Design Patterns of Successful Role-playing Games* (2006): http://legendaryquest.netfirms.com/books/Patterns.zip

23. On the creation of a functionalist philosophy that reads the social text as a product of text/program (interface) and the user using that very interface. One should look how formal game structures "inform, change or otherwise participate in human activity." Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 53.

24. For games as rituals, see Bowman 47-54. See also J. Tuomas Harviainen. "Information, Immersion, Identity: The Interplay of Multiple Selves During Live-Action Role-Play" *Journal of Interactive Drama* 1 no. 2 (October 2006): 9-52. For an example of ritual theory applied to larp, see Bowman, "Love, Sex, Death, and Liminality," in this volume.

25. Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 94.

26. Based on a sampling from 30 RPG core rulebooks chosen at random from the author's collection. Actual average: 7.92%.

27. Luhmann's original commentary was about the mass media, but easily applies to subsystems of media, such as TRPGs. See Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of Mass Media*, translated by Kathleen Cross. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

28. Joshua Abboud, "The Pathways of Time: Temporality and Procedures in MMORPGs," in *Dungeons, Dragons and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game*, edited by Gerald A. Voorhees, Joshua Call, and Katie Whitlock, 48-65. (New York: Continuum Books, 2012), 62.

29. Winkler, 144.

with attributes and weapon lists, and the players get to statistically test their characters against new pools of hit points. Another reason would be the long-term affinities between U.S. military personnel and TRPGs,[30] such that the disciplines of tactical simulation and post-combat therapy incline the TRPG toward certain design realities. Yet another reason would be the American longing for clear good-vs.-evil conflicts in the midst of Cold War political aporias, as described by Daniel MacKay.[31]

However, the affective appeals of combat also reach deep into the game mechanics themselves. A combat system usually arbitrates three major dimensions of a diegesis: *time, space* and the *body*, often described in that order within TRPG combat rules. Separate rules arbitrating these dimensions delineate combat from other contests, conflicts, and methods of resolution. TRPG books routinely begin their "Combat" sections with a note on "rounds" or "turns," denoting an egalitarian convention of sharing the spotlight among the players present. These time units are sometimes loosely defined, such as in *Call of Cthulhu* (1981, 1995): "A combat round is a deliberately elastic unit of time in which everyone wishing to act ... has a chance to complete at least one action."[32] Everyone gets a "turn," but not all turns are created equal; those whose characters are designed for combat advantage may get to act first, occasionally more often, and toward greater story effect.

Space is arbitrated via a series of rules denoting range, cover, and movement—that is, how characters can improve probabilities of hitting and damaging their opponents without exposing themselves to such damage. Description and maps are used to give player-characters senses of proximity and threat. Bodies are usually managed through wound states—such as in *Amber* (1991)[33] or *Apocalypse World* (2010)[34]—or hit points—such as in *D&D*, *Call of Cthulhu*, or *Feng Shui* (1996)[35]—which numerically indicate how close a subject is from death. Time, space, and bodies are all harnessed for the sake of generating uncertainty and tension about the scale of potential outcomes: Will a character die? Did the ambush work? How hard is it to kill a dragon? Each turn is a chance to affect fate; each move or attack is a weighted gamble; and each hit point lost a potential move toward mortal doom.

The affect system generated by combat can generate alienated labor and anxiety rather that of creative thought and play. Too many tactical options and a player-character undergoes "analysis paralysis"[36]; too few and they are simply using dice randomizers as little blips of surrogate tension surrounding the effects of individual blows. Those who remove themselves from the fight cannot participate in the same time schema as the rest of the players. In any case, I conceive of traditional combat as alienated labor because of the player having to subject themselves to (A) repeated uncertainty via the randomizers that apply time penalties to failures to hit—given that too many misses may prolong the fight; (B) long waits for other players' decisions; (C) programmed inability to exit the time scale; (D) weighted probabilities burdening player-characters with prior decisions made about their characters during character creation or leveling up, possibly many sessions earlier; and the (E) overall banal familiarity of the experience across game sessions. Certainly, other patterns of TRPG game design may intervene. Dice rolls can be augmented with partial successes that revolve around a give-and-take in the diegetic fiction ("I slice open his arm, but now I have slipped on the floor slick with his blood"). Time commitments can be shortened with real-time timer or action-based limitations; combat can be treated like any other conflict to be resolved, which is the strategy of most "story games" like *Primetime Adventures* (2006).[37] Limited economies of action points can be spent to enhance combat effectiveness in the moment ("I spent 2 luck points to push my roll up to a 6 – and I push her off the cliff!"). Yet, removal of the monotonous aspects of combat appears to require conscious design efforts, and it is such efforts that have distinguished individual TRPG systems over time.

Design Histories of RPG Combat

The discourse analysis below concerns how the game rules treat time, space, labor, and the body.

30. Sande Chen and David Michael, *Serious Games* (Boston, MA: Thompson Course Technology, 2006), 49.

31. Daniel MacKay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 21. See also notes on good-vs.-evil conflicts as mapped from TRPGs to digital RPGs in Tanya Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, edited by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 207.

32. Sandy Petersen and Lynn Willis, *Call of Cthulhu*, Fifth Edition (Chaosium, 1995), 33.

33. Erick Wujcik, *Amber* (Phage Press, 1991).

34. D. Vincent Baker, *Apocalypse World* (lumpley games, 2010).

35. Robin D. Laws, *Feng Shui: Action Movie Roleplaying*, Second Edition (Atlas Games, 1996).

36. See Björk and Holopainen for the definition of the term.

37. Matt Wilson, *Primetime Adventures* (Dog-Eared Designs, 2006).

D&D in its various forms throughout the 1970s[38] established what I consider to be the normative procedure for TRPG combat. Players resort to dice for who goes first, which is called "rolling initiative." Then, each player takes turns in confronting threats posed by the dungeon master with dice. One rolls more dice to see whether attacks hit or fail, and the dungeon master marks damage from a third roll off creature hit points. On the dungeon master's turn, they treat each one of their creatures as its own player-character and roll dice. The board-game-like turn structure divides a player's attention into chunks revolving around a dice roll. Weighted probabilities – via attributes and weapons—are the main guarantee of success. Difficulties set by monster attributes then reward the player in gold and advancement points for depriving it of life. In the 1978 *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, Gary Gygax both describes the players as "the primary actors and actresses in the fascinating drama which unfolds before them."[39] Those glowing words are followed by an admission of the grim reality that "every adventure will be likely to have combat for him or her at some point."[40] Greg Costikyan describes it as spending "a fair bit of time slaying monsters and taking their treasure—D&D's experience system depends on this kind of behavior."[41] The bodies of the hit-point-depleted monsters are looted and left behind, presumed to dissolve into air as *empty bodies*. Corpse disposal is seldom raised.

The D&D model frames fighting in a schizophrenic fashion. On the one hand, Gygax goes through great lengths to describe how the subsystem is intended to create "reasonably manageable combat ... It is not in the best interests of an adventure game, however, to delve too deeply into cut and thrust, parry, and riposte."[42] On the other hand, the steps for combat model those of a sophisticated program:

STEPS FOR COMBAT

"**1.** Determine if either or both parties are SURPRISED.

2. Determine distance, if unknown, between the parties.

3. If both parties are unsurprised, or equally surprised, determine INITIATIVE for that round.

4. Determine the results of whatever actions are decided upon by the party with initiative.

A. Avoid engagement if possible.

B. Attempt to parley.

C. Await action by other party.

D. Discharge missiles or magical device attacks or cast spells or turn undead.

E. Close to striking range, or charge.

F. Set weapons against possible opponent charge.

G. Strike blows with weapons, to kill or subdue.

H. Grapple or hold.

5. Determine the results of whatever actions are decided upon by the party which lost the initiative.

6. Continue each melee round by determination of distance, initiative, and action until melee ends due to fleeing, inability to continue, or death of one or both parties."[43]

It is illustrative, for example, that nowhere in Step 6 are there dramatic or narrative justifications for breaking off combat. Combat *will* proceed, and it *will* only end given a specific end-state involving the abilities of parties to continue to mechanically engage. Guerilla warfare and other means of engaging enemies are omitted in favor of outright hit-point-reducing slugfests.

38. See Ron Edwards, "A Hard Look at Dungeons and Dragons," last modified June 4 2003. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/20/

39. Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Players Handbook* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1978), 2.

40. Ibid., 104.

41. Greg Costikyan, "I Have No Words & I Must Design: Toward a Critical Vocabulary for Games," last modified 2002. http://www.costik.com/nowords2002.pdf

42. Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1978), 61.

43. Ibid.

In the early 1980s, Bruce Galloway wrote *Fantasy Wargaming* as a simulationist response to the above system. In his words, "D&D scenarios exist in a vacuum ... A fantasy scenario must contain its own intrinsic and consistent logic."[44] Galloway maintains most of the structures mentioned above and adds a whole handful of others revolving around fighter morale,[45] horoscope signs,[46] and large scale troop formations.[47] One combat design decision shared by many TRPGs of this era such as *Rolemaster* (1980) was to add even more procedures as a corrective to the perceived unrealism of *D&D*. Yet *Fantasy Wargaming* presumes its reader already has experience with the D&D rituals and assumptions underwriting its combat system. Under "combat," it starts immediately with a somewhat odd stipulation that weapons with longer reach can strike first before melee weapons.[48] Time and space management around a knowing audience is built right into the subsystem, and players are made to do even more of it. Galloway's book stands among many; even *Call of Cthulhu*'s overtures about storytelling are interrupted with a combat section that introduces the hand-to-hand/ranged weapon dichotomy, the division of time into combat rounds, and the procedural loss of hit points.[49] Even Ken St. Andre's *Tunnels and Trolls*, a system lauded for more efficiently handling fights than *D&D*, contains almost identical language about hit points: "Constitution is the general measure of a character's health. If CON ever goes to 0, the character dies."[50] *Tunnels and Trolls* still holds sacred the special role of combat time: "One complete round of combat in which all combatants have had their fair opportunity to try to score hits. Although it is considered 'officially' to be 2 minutes long, in actual play, the fighters are probably only clashing for 15 or 20 seconds at a time."[51]

In Gygax's *Oriental Adventures* (OA, 1985) and Erick Wujcik's *Amber*, however, the respective authors finesse the entry into the combat subsystem with descriptive fiction. Gygax fills the page with 12 single-spaced paragraphs on what OA combat looks like in the mind's eye: "Like the knight, the samurai sits upon his horse for the coming battle. His helmet with its great flaring neck piece is tied into place."[52] This is all before one turns to the division of time into combat rounds and initiative rolls. Wujcik's diceless system begins with a scant several sentences about his combat subsystem being one simple mechanic of comparing attribute ranks between the two quarreling parties. "Everything else," he writes "is just a matter of adding details, figuring things out when it's a close call, and making things seem realistic."[53] Gygax's illustrative fiction gives way to procedures and dice bonuses, while Wujcik's text captures speech acts themselves: in-game interchanges that produce winners, losers, and interesting fiction in between. Wujcik also directly addresses phasing combat into different time schemes,[54] and even the issue of regarding the bodies of the participants as important objects in narration.[55] Though Amber provides little protection against gamemaster fiat determining outcomes, its combat system hints at specific trends of interest: putting creative labor into combat, relying on it as a mechanism that enhances the fiction over interrupting it with its processes.

44. Bruce Galloway, *Fantasy Wargaming*. (New York: Stein and Day, 1981), ix. For a divergent game response to D&D, see also Ken St. Andre, *The Tunnels and Trolls Rule Book* (London: Corgi Books, 1986).

45. Galloway, 146.

46. Ibid., 180-181.

47. Ibid., 153.

48. Ibid., 145.

49. Petersen and Willis, 33.

50. St. Andre, 13.

51. St. Andre, 39.

52. Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Oriental Adventures* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR, 1985), 98.

53. Wujcik, 80.

54. Wujcik, 95.

55. Ibid., 100-101.

Again with respect to D&D, TRPGs of the 1990s such as *Feng Shui* and *Unknown Armies* defined themselves as more grounded in the storytelling conventions of genre movies than the tactical fantasy worlds of Gygax and Galloway's time, and with rules to match. *Feng Shui* issues a call for action: "[Fights] should be stylish, fast-moving, and wildly improbable."[56] It conceives of fights as a series of stunts that would eventually simulate a movie. The horror game *Unknown Armies* (UA, 1998) makes combat truly frightening by offering an array of options to defuse the situation, and then ushers forth the words: "The rest of this chapter contains rules for simulating the murder of human beings. Have fun."[57] UA uses a "hidden hit points" system, in that a game master describes only the injuries while secretly marking off hit points, foregrounding the body-as-fictionally-described over the abstract systems involved. Despite reformist intentions, however, the "cinematic turn" TRPGs still adhered to the rounds, initiative, dice rolls, and other trappings of the traditional combat subsystem.

In the last decade, so-called "indie" TRPGs or "story games" have made headway in the U.S., U.K., Brazil, and continental Europe. Divestment from the standard combat round marks many of them, as well as from rolls hinging on simple success and failure, and the depletion of hit points. *Primetime Adventures* (2006), a game about creating your own TV show, typifies the movement: framing scenes that resolve certain narrative "stakes" rather than allotting combat its own privileged space. Everything, whether social or physical, condenses to a construct called "conflict." *Psi*Run* (2012), a fast-paced TRPG about psychic amnesiacs on the run, sets stakes via a limited pool of dice that allow players to manage their character outcomes like resources.[58] The definitive Vietnam War TRPG *carry: a game about war* (2006) designates specific action scenes for the players, but still uses the stakes model to resolve outcomes. One player-character gives the others orders, and the soldiers choose to "agree" or "disagree" with the order they have been given.[59] While still attached to dice, the subsystem's affective appeal is unique: only a mixture of agreement and dissent among the ranks will have the squad lose the fewest people.

Outside of the scene-framing strategies listed above, time commitment to combat has been profitably framed by D. Vincent Baker, who simply limits it to three total rounds of dynamic dice-rolling in the Babylonian thriller *In a Wicked Age...* (2008).[60] Baker's *Apocalypse World* (2010) even makes all battle moves optional; conflict is centered around the structure of moves like "seize by force," which then put markers on various "countdown clock" mechanisms related to other characters in the game. Thus, figurative time is used to create tension between characters, rather than empty procedural time spent up against chance. In addition, everyone in *Apocalypse World* gets a name, and a brief history. These new systems all move to break down the monolithic combat subsystem into genre-specific chains of affect presumably in tune with their groups' creative agendas and with more complex ideas of time, space, and body. Combat as conceived under the original *D&D* model, as it turned out, could not exactly occupy the same design space as games exploring thematic territory that required more of players beyond rolling and waiting to reduce hit points.

Affect as Empty Bodies, Empty Time

TRPG mechanics have both ludic and philosophical weight. It matters that the player-character playing the gun-toting gangster who wants to fight Cthulhu's star-spawn can rightfully invoke an alternate sense of time, space, and corporeality to swallow one or more hours of game time in order to produce moments of cheap tension afforded by dice rolls. Game rules presume affect throughout their texts: excitement at rolls for initiative, fear at a description of a creature, increased agency with the expenditure of karma points to improve a roll, good-natured frustration with a "miss" result on a to-hit die, and so on. All of these micro-moments fundamentally deal with whether or not a player-character's time and effort is "wasted" in the "grind" of combat.

It also matters that the narration of fighting and the taking of human lives should primarily become a site of the twin forces of competition (*agôn*)[61] and chance (*alea*) theorized by Roger Caillois[62] rather than sites of vertigo (*ilinx*) or simulation (*mimicry*). Caillois'

56. Laws, 127.

57. Greg Stolze and John Tynes, *Unknown Armies*. Second Edition (Atlas Games, 2002), 47.

58. Meguey Baker, *Psi*Run* (Night Sky Games, 2012).

59. Nathan D. Paoletta, *carry: a game about war* (Hamsterprophet Productions, 2006), 42.

60. D. Vincent Baker, *In a Wicked Age...* (lumpley games, 2008), 14.

61. When playing against the dungeon master, Gary Gygax otherwise argued that *D&D* was a cooperative experience, a claim not so well backed by his reward systems. Cited in Call, Joshua, et al., "Introduction," in Voorhees, Call, and Whitlock, 16.

62. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

work saw gameplay as a vehicle to affectively separate space and time; that is, to transport moods and subjectivities away from their spatial limitations for a limited period of time: to imagine. Many of the combat systems mentioned, however, prize Caillois' formalized *ludus* mode of play (sport) over the *paidia* (improvisation) that would allow one to emotionally explore the process of threatening, wounding, and killing.[63] It also matters that one cannot pause the relentless turns at the wheel of fate to breathe or even assess the situation through the character or the group. Each player-character is responsible for swinging and hitting; they are not responsible for performing their own interiority or having a relationship to the larger cosmos during the process. The anonymous *Geek's Dream Girl* poster writes:

> *A horde of minions with a few more powerful monsters can make an epic feeling fight that doesn't take an entire night to run ... Not only does combat go faster but everyone gets a chance to shine."*[64]

The poster's desire for an "epic feeling" and the follow-up injunction that "combat should not rule the story" grasps at the notion that combat should be situated within affective mechanisms that bond players to their characters—i.e., character creation and agency—and those that bond players to their group narratives. However, recall that the poster's solutions are primarily to circumvent the combat subsystem in this process. This is due to the fact that combat subsystems—as written and socially executed—empty bodies and time of meaning to make combat manageable.

Combat removes bodies' corporeality, names, and integration into wider systems of meaning.[65] Its subsystem reduces bodies to a threshold of being hit and a set of hit-points: a numerical value. Reduce the hit-points to 0, and their icons are simply removed from the map of play. In some ways, it ignores the bodies of the players as well, who must break their immersion to head to the restroom and so forth.

Though this bodilessness of combat is not a problem strictly limited to TRPGs,[66] these games partake in the mediated elision of the body to fulfill not only the emotional needs of the players, but the needs of the autopoietic combat subsystem itself. Tactics require predictable targets at which to shoot. Enemies of any given combat are usually hostile surfaces against which one responds with deadly intent. "Were-rat 3" or "goon with eye-patch" have X number of hit-points or, in *Feng Shui*, they are "mooks" you can "down" with a single dice roll.[67] Nameless and presumably healthy beings are penetrated, bludgeoned, shot, and burned by the heroes for the sake of self-defense; their bodies are looted and then left there to rot or for some anonymous law enforcement agency to clean up. Certainly, this behavior conforms to strictures placed by the fantasy and action genres most games are to play out; these are films and novels with high body counts. However, game mechanics also have the opportunity to promote an idea of human and animal life that matters without losing drama. *Apocalypse World* at least requires that every human non-player-character (NPC) have a name, and *Psi*Run* forces the player-character into active agency over whether or not the "psi-power goes wild: people are dead, things destroyed."[68] The reincorporation of affective systems indicating that hit points reflect real stakes and permanent health; the looting of bodies proceeding thanks to narrative motive and not player avarice; and the consideration of the hospital care and burial rites of the NPCs receiving narrative weight would do some work to reincorporate the bodies into the equation.

Through common combat subsystems inspired by *D&D*, onslaughts on empty bodies also consume human time as "empty time." By empty time, I mean two different concurrent ways of experiencing time that happen through combat: as procedural drudgery and as simultaneous experience with other role-players. Whereas the rest of a TRPG's action is generally fluid enough to accommodate for Caillois' *ilinx* and *mimicry* or for flashbacks and the framing of new scenes, combat game mechanics rigorously herd players into a circular sequence of turns that privilege procedural flow and the TRPG book as the rule of law governing time. The player is asked to hold onto the tension caused by the uncertain

63. My analysis of *ludus* and *paidia* is indebted to Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 3-45, here 44.

64. "4 Ways to Speed up D&D Combat."

65. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "bodies without organs" from *Anti-Oedipus* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972) apply here: as a projection surface on which different subjectivities can map themselves, rather than as a sacrosanct, impenetrable body *with* organs, which would notably interpose its physical reality between vectors of subject-object interaction.

66. For cinema, see Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004). For digital RPGs, see Hilde R. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, eds. *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

67. Laws, 147.

68. M. Baker, et al., 35.

outcome of the fight while procedurally asking somewhat uninteresting narrative questions about the content of that time: usually hitting and missing and removing hit points. Combat time is bracketed off from regular game time, organized into turns, and left open-ended, i.e., until the end of the fight. In practice, the creation and agency enhancing a traditional TRPG experience collapse into assorted opportunities to roll the die. A hotly contested fight can drag out to three or more hours of real time, such that meta-game time constraints can actually influence fight outcomes. The march through the dice-rolling cycle reminds one of Benedict Anderson's notion of nations as peoples experiencing "homogeneous, empty time" moving through history—or here, ludic space—together.[69] J. Tuomas Harviainen and Andreas Lieberoth wisely stress the importance of bounded rituals in motivating play[70]—for example, the rolling of initiative or opposed dice-rolling contests—and the ritual of combat binds together role-players from disparate communities around the world. Sessions by different groups may differ, but the lived experience of each player taking a turn to roll a die in order to put away abstract, numerical threats remains a staple of this activity.

Combat in Digital RPG Design and Closing Remarks

TRPGs have had a profound impact on digital role-playing games.[71] From the attack bonuses of magical swords in *Neverwinter Nights 2*[72] to the hit locations in *Fallout 3*, the very TRPG combat mechanics have flowed from one medium to the other with relative ease. The weighting of probabilities through bonuses and multipliers obviously plays a role in the digital role-playing game, but the time, space, and body logics of the dice roll and the turn/round have been replaced with computer algorithms. Therefore, a player need not worry about the empty time of procedure. The combat probabilities are now veiled behind a sheet of code, the bodies-as-hit-points sheathed in a skin that audio-visually reacts to player-initiated attacks. To some degree, the negative affect incidentally introduced by the turn-taking, attrition-based combat model has been replaced with the philosophical issue of being able to kill just about anything based on an algorithm.[73] In stand-alone digital RPGs, the negative affect comes from isolation from other players; in massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), it comes from isolation from one's loved ones and immediate surroundings. Bodies of the opponents matter even less; an optimal build of the avatar's body even more. For if the player-character is not a finely honed killing machine, then how does one optimize real time and effort spent online?[74]

Game designers'[75] insistence that "system does matter" remains a major intellectual intervention. Researchers can now look at tabletop and other RPG subsystems—particularly the text introducing these subsystems—to determine the types of play they generally reinforce, and thereby the philosophical, ethical, and logical bases on which the system itself rests. Second, TRPG games and the sessions that they eventually produce can be examined as social texts, with the system itself unable to be fully "read" without including the socially situated narrative it produces.[76] Third, routine subsystems –including but not limited to character statistics, combat, and basic task resolution—appear in the current scholarship to be frequently overlooked in favor of narrative scenarios and affinities between the player and character. In looking past the rules and procedures shared by so many groups, one misses the key ludic moments in which system and social text come together to produce meanings and emotions. Put another way: miss the unnecessary obstacles imposed and miss the play. If RPGs are indeed considered comparable to other media works as "machines for generating affect,"[77] then attending to the way in which prescribed game rules articulate the affective flows of violence-as-pretense becomes an

69. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY: Verso, 1983), 25.

70. J. Tuomas Harviainen and Andreas Lieberoth, "Similarity of Social Information Processes in Games and Rituals: Magical Interfaces," *Simulation and Gaming* 43, no. 4 (August 2012): 528-549.

71. Matt Barton, *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters, 2008), 14-15.

72. Andrew Baerg, "Risky Business: Neo-Liberal Rationality and the Computer RPG," in Voorhees, Call and Whitlock, 153-173: 166.

73. Krzywinska, 219.

74. Ibid., 161.

75. Especially Ron Edwards ("System Does Matter"). For an even shorter, more colloquial explanation, see D. Vincent Baker, "Dice & Cloud: a symmetry," last modified April 27, 2009. http://www.lumpley.com/comment.php?entry=438.

76. As argued by Markus Montola, "Social Constructionism and Ludology: Implications for the Study of Games," *Simulation and Gaming* 42 no. 2 (December 2011).

77. Steven Shaviro, "Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales," *Film-Philosophy* 14 no. 1. (2010).

important task for those seeking to understand how RPGs function.

Hegel once wrote that philosophy at its peak is merely "its time held in thought."[78] Game design principles can also only be of their time, opting between the entrenchment of past modes and exploration of the present modes of the medium. Combat as a turn-taking, attrition-based game of weighted probabilities has its own time and place: its own social, emotional, and physical demands. However, whether or not this monolithic subsystem must remain a staple of most tabletop role-playing environments remains a question for self-reflexive designers and researchers to answer.

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